TOP 10 PC GAMES OF 2008

14 PAGES! LEFT 4 DEAD, FALLOUT 3, STARCRAFT 2, FAR CRY 2 + MORE!

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING

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ISSUE 13 \ DECEMBER 2007 \ THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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TOP 10 PC GAMES OF 2008!

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INSIDE VALVE

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ARE GRAPHICS CARDS DOOMED?

VALVE'S GABE NEWELL TALKS TECH

FALLOUT 3

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: KANE'S WRATH

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LEFT 4 DEAD

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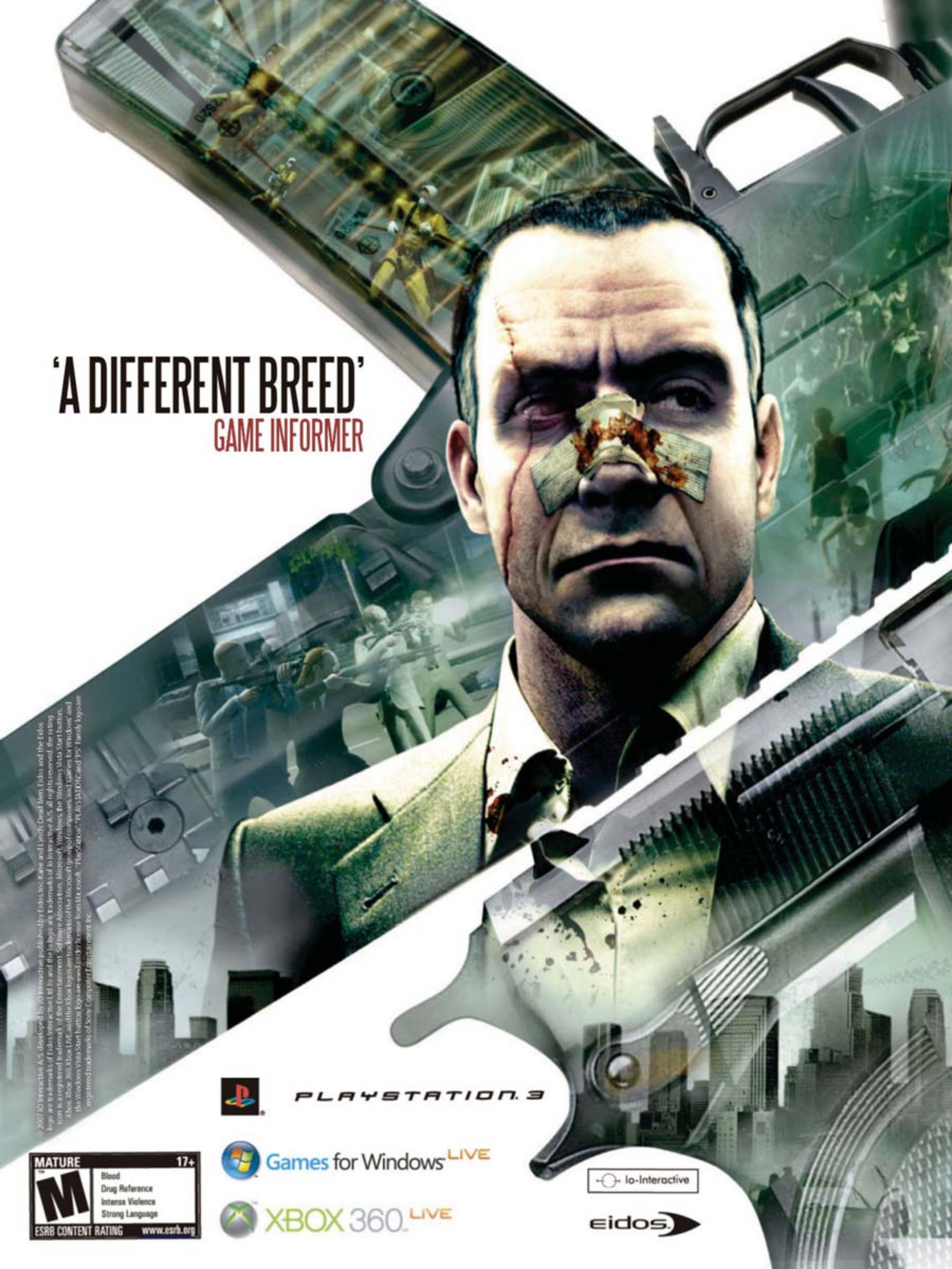

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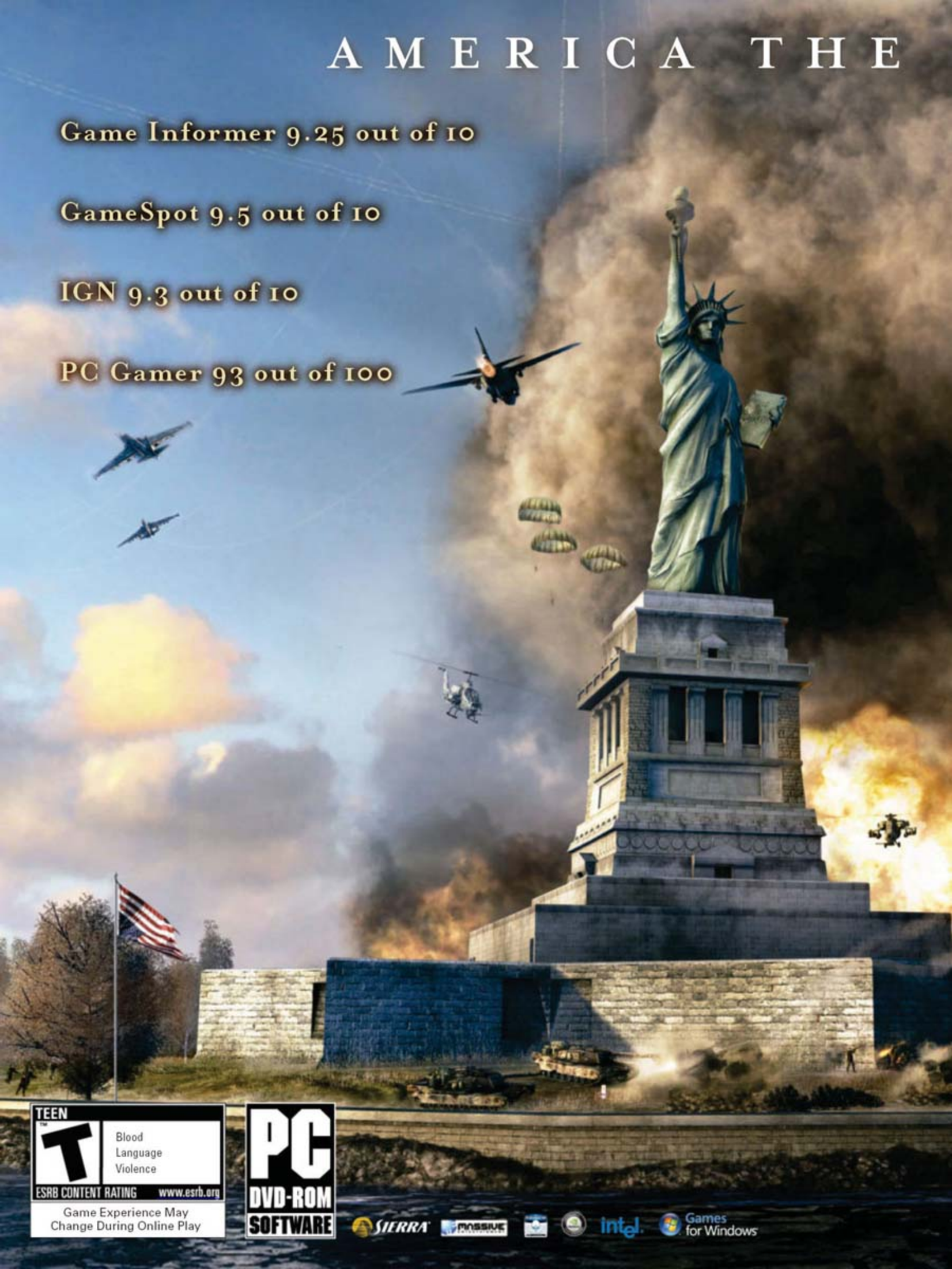
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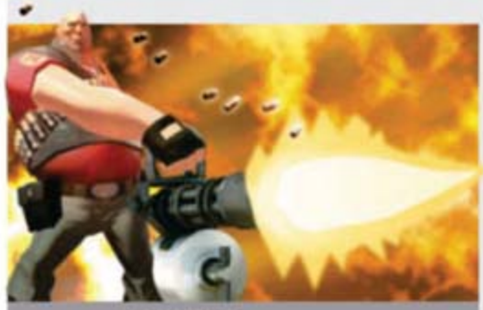

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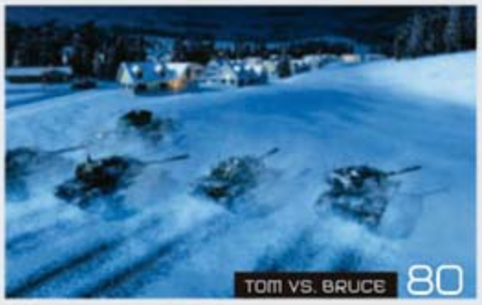
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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW13.1UP.COM

He's a quote machine, that Gabe Newell, which is why we let him talk lots more online! Plus, awesome *Portal* strategies, and videos of some of our favorites from the Top 10 of 2008 feature!

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Games for Windows LIVE

THE ASTERISK

OK, so maybe it's the "Top 10 of Whenever"

I have a confession to make. Our "Top 10 Games of 2008" story is a lie. OK, well, maybe not a "lie." I mean, we're not willfully not telling you the truth. You know we wouldn't do that to you. Not after all we've been through together. However, though we took the list seriously as we put it together, and though all 10 of those games do indeed look promising, there is honestly no way we could possibly know whether in fact these will be the best 10 games of 2008. Heck, we don't even really know whether any of these games will actually ship in 2008.

So, why do it? I don't know. Why do anything? Why not just sit in bed all day with a big bowl of Cheetos and a stack of comic books? (Actually, that sounds like a really good idea.) We made the list for the same reason that I know you are going to check it out: because lists are fun. What's particularly fun about a list like this is going back later and seeing just how right and wrong you were. For example, our Top 10 of 2007, which appeared in this magazine exactly one year ago, includes such no-shows as *Spore* and *Alan Wake*, but also some better calls, such as *BioShock* and Valve's *Orange Box* (though it wasn't called that at the time, and *Portal* barely even got mentioned—and we totally failed to mention such 2007 stars as *World in Conflict* and *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*).

The point is not to deflate or discredit the article before you even read it, but simply to remind you that this is not an exact science. We did our best to pick the games that not only have impressed us so far, but also showed some tangible evidence of actually coming out sometime within the next 12 months. And just to show how tough we are, we penalized the 2007 no-shows by not allowing them to appear on this year's list. That'll teach 'em for breaking our hearts! Bastards!

In other news, I offer a heartfelt thanks to my overworked, beleaguered staff, who, for crazy reasons I can't possibly explain, had a mere 2.5 weeks, including nights and weekends, to put this issue together, an especially difficult task given that *The Orange Box* had just come out, as if to mock us. Sean, MJ, Rosie, Shawn, Darren, and Ryan: You guys rule. And now that we're done here—*Team Fortress 2*, anyone?

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *Half-Life 2: The Orange Box, World in Conflict, Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
We do what we must because we can for the good of all of us, except for those who are dead.

Now Playing: *Half-Life 2: The Orange Box, World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)
Tap the bottle and twist the cap....

Now Playing: *Hellgate: London, TimeShift, Portal*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)
Ryan would participate in this hilarious song lyric–themed "Meet the Staff" if he could just translate the *Star Wars* theme into words.

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)
So fine, sue me, online newbie. Sonic stripped nudie ain't a work-safe movie.

Now Playing: *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR
Blue are the life-giving waters taken for granted. They quietly understand. Once-happy turquoise armies lay opposite ready. But wonder why the fight is on..... Just ask the axis.

Now Playing: *HL2: The Orange Box*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER
Rosie would participate in this hilarious song lyric–themed "Meet the Staff" if only her brain could still function.

Now Playing: The usual
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Letters

The all hate-mail edition

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A MESSAGE FOR TOM

This message is for Tom Chick, from the Tom vs. Bruce column. I am tired of your constant snarky, anti-American comments. You can't even get through the first paragraph without spewing some venomous rhetoric. America is an international pariah? Why don't you go to China, Cuba, Venezuela, or wherever mindless Marxists consider their utopia?

And don't give me that line about your free speech. I am not an agent of the government. You are free to spread your bile on any street corner or on your website. But I am not going to pay to support it.

Gus Oakes

MEDAL OF HONOR: GROUNDED

Your 7-out-of-10 score for *Medal of Honor: Airborne* (*GFW* #11, pg. 72) was nothing less than a gift. I have played all the *MOH* games, and this is by far the worst in the series. Saving in this game is a waste of time; you end up back in an airdrop no matter what you do. I was anticipating the release of this game for quite a while, but after playing through the first two parts of the campaign, I quit in frustration. It seemed that the developers forgot what made the series so much fun; I can only hope whoever was responsible for the changes will find a new place to work. I fully realize many will like the new direction, but I do not.

L. Curley

ANOTHER ERA

"Hey, what ever happened to the days of flight-sim cover stories?"

I would like [*Computer Gaming World* founder] Russell Sipe to start up a new PC gaming magazine. I remember how I used to be able to read *CGW* in public without being embarrassed. I mean, at that time there were kids' magazines like *Nintendo Power*, but *CGW* was for serious hobbyists. There was no flipping past three pages of tacky ads to get to the table of contents. At that time, *CGW* was a PC-games magazine first, and a method to sell advertising second. I know—I am naive. There was the small Psalms quote in the masthead. Who reads the masthead anyway? But it was removed because it might "offend" someone. *CGW* prided itself on NOT rating games, but rather giving a report on a game and letting the reader decide. I remember many editorials about this.

After Ziff Davis Media purchased the magazine, [editor-in-chief] Johnny Wilson wrote an editorial about how change is good, and we're gonna rate games now.... Apparently, the head office decided they needed to rate games to appeal to the nonreaders out there. I was sad, but writers like Alan Emrich and Scorpia were still there, so I kept buying the magazine, even though I was starting to see the oncoming sellout. I know PC games always strived to become mainstream, but I always hoped we could set an example. Now, it's just become another example of pop culture appealing to the lowest common denominator. To sell. Make money. Nothing wrong with that, but I had high hopes for our hobby. I really thought we could inspire society, instead of just joining it.

So now we have Games for Windows. If I had my way, I'd still be using DOS. All the L33t (did I spell that right?) clones have Plug-and-Play, rail guns, and Xbox. And if you don't have [an] Xbox, you can play ports on the PC. Sheesh. As time has passed, I guess I've fallen out of the demographic. I see the old *CGW* the same as the old games... produced for the love of the hobby. Now, it's kinda...well...good luck to Britney and Lindsay!

Will C.

Someone from the Cretaceous Period called looking for you the other day. I think she said her name was Scorpia.

PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED?

Considering how great you claim *BioShock* [is], your elliptical review (*GFW* #11, pg. 63) doesn't make it clear *why*. Having few choices and being blatantly manipulated by situations, characters, and level design is hardly new—and usually frowned upon. The strength of reviewer Sean Molloy's emotional reactions may say more about him than the game, for all I know. Two "surprisingly similar paths" with two endings, one "unfulfilling?" This is gaming greatness? What makes this so artistic?

Your *BioShock* review also assumes I'm already familiar with the game. Mostly, I'm not: I don't have time to pore over previews and discussion boards, and I know from experience that what's discussed in a preview often doesn't match up with the final product. The review's tiny pictures, obscure captions, and undefined references ("plasmids"?) leave me wondering just what *BioShock* is about and what it's like to play it. It sounds like you're preaching to the converted instead of helping a potential buyer decide whether to purchase the game.

Samhain

Sean says: "It wasn't just the fact that you were being manipulated, but the way the game willfully and brilliantly acknowledged it that made *BioShock* so rad. Anyway, I see game reviews (and movie reviews...and book reviews) as having two audiences: 1) the prospective buyer who wants a checklist of features and a value assessment—worth my time and money, or no?—and 2) the person who has already played a game and wants to engage in some sort of discussion (even if it's one-sided) about it. Knowing that my review, in this particular case, would be read by folks well over a month after the game's release, and knowing that everyone in the universe (with a few exceptions, apparently) would be talking about *BioShock* anyway, I consciously wrote more for that second audience this time around. Obviously, not every *GFW* reader knows the ins and outs of plasmids—but I think a vast majority of them do."

EXTRA PAGE

Only one page of letters in your October issue? That's absurd! I demand you put this letter on page two of your Letters section!

Matt Sayar

Consider it done. Oh, wait—*dammit*.

Write us at GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com.

MAIL BYTES

Is it just me, or has *GFW* gone on a strict diet or something? At this rate of shrinkage, in a few more months your whole magazine will fit on a postcard.

Aaron Cooperband

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Dan

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Deploy a group of Nod Reckoners and you've got an instant ambush.

TACTICS X 2

Like *DEFCON*, *Supreme Commander*, and countless other globe-trotting RTS titles, *Kane's Wrath* "very much wants to play to the fantasy that you're running a world war through a computer map," according to associate producer Jim Vessella. "The Global Conquest metagame really opens up the world, showing previously unexplored places [such as China and Russia] to see how Tiberium has affected the region." As much as this metagame mixes up traditional *C&C* gameplay, the new subfactions add wrinkles for multiplayer matches. After playing a few rounds, we gathered key insights on pg. 20.

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The series arrives where all roads lead.

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Free Play

We uncover some music-themed PC games you can play for nothing.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: KANE'S WRATH

RTS makers look at the big picture

Nod's cybernetic Awakened troops (right) can stun foes.

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **EALA** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2008**

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

He's not bald. No cult of blind devotees obeys him. But still, just like *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars'* cartoonish supervillain Kane, lead producer Mike Verdu dreams of global conquest—a grand vision of a world-domination metagame that breaks out of the boundaries of a single RTS map. Yet for years, his RTS team at EALA has been too focused on linear storytelling (and trussing up Lando Calrissian for camera time) to make Verdu's vision a reality. That's looking to change with *Command & Conquer 3*'s upcoming stand-alone expansion, *Kane's Wrath*. Following the lead of series such as *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War* and *Total War*, *Wrath* layers an open-ended tactical game over a polished RTS.

But before sharing *C&C3*'s new worldview with me, associate producer Jim Vessella dives into a multiplayer game to show off the full scope of *Kane's Wrath*.

CLASS ACTION

"Since *Tiberium Wars'* launch last spring," says Vessella, "we've released nine gameplay-balancing patches." But certain tactics can't be countered by simple nerfs—and so *Kane's Wrath* provides new weapons to redistribute power. Vessella hopes that scrambling skirmishes with *Wrath*'s new troops and factions will combat some spamming attacks—early tactics such as churning out swarms of cheap units (like rocket troopers) and marching them into enemy territory, or building out defensive turrets to tower rush the map. To counter, the GDI's new sonic arsenal includes area-of-effect weapons that shut down midgame mobs, while Shatterer tanks topple tower defenses from a safe distance.

Kane's Wrath also injects two subfactions per side, each flexing specific strengths and otherwise unattainable upgrades. (See "Armed Forces," pg. 21). At the start of a session, you pick between a rank-and-file strike force or an army that caters to a more specific play style such as turtling, rushing, or stealth. Sound familiar? "The notion of subfactions comes directly from *C&C Generals: Zero Hour*," Vessella admits—and not surprisingly, much of the *Wrath* team worked on *ZH*, which married *Street Fighter*–esque character matchups with RTS gameplay. The problem, according to Vessella, was that while the generals had balanced strengths, they lacked personality. "We really needed to draw these groups from the fiction of the *C&C* universe and work it into the gameplay."

A HISTORY LESSON

Over 10 years' worth of fiction keeps the *C&C* series going—but also keeps it locked in a cycle of linearity. "It's hard to make anything *but* linear games when you have a complex story to tell," says Verdu. This expansion breaks free by dipping into history instead, retelling what's happened between the first Tiberium War (*C&C: Tiberium Sun*) and beyond the third war (*C&C3*) as seen entirely from the Brotherhood of Nod's perspective. You help bring Kane back to power. You cause the Rio insurrections alluded to in the beginning of *Tiberium Wars*. You set the chain of events that brings the Scrin to Earth.

Dipping into the past allows Verdu's metagame vision quest to become a reality: In the new Global Conquest mode, main objective points and missions pop up on a world map and move the story forward—hammy cut-scenes and all—but how you get there is entirely up to you.

"We were so cautious to not overload the player," says Verdu. "Our first attempts [at a metagame] in *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth* resulted in not much more than a glorified mission selector...but you can see the evolution over time."

"It isn't going to be *Civ IV: Command & Conquer Edition*," adds Vessella. No 30-minute turns, no prolonged chin-scratching sessions. Think of it like a game of *Risk* played on top of the RTS. Here's how it works. >

THE WAR ROOM

> "[GLOBAL CONQUEST] ISN'T GOING TO BE *CIV IV: COMMAND & CONQUER EDITION*."
>
> –JIM VESSELLA, ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, *COMMAND & CONQUER 3: KANE'S WRATH*

Operations Phase (tactical planning). Let's say you start a round with 10 Operations Points (OP). You can spend them on anything from upgrading bases and strike forces to using support powers.

Support powers work the same way as those in the RTS game as you upgrade your base—get up to three powers (such as reconnaissance data on an enemy base), or launch a Vertigo bomber assault to soften incoming strike forces (the troops ordered into RTS battles).

Bases become the critical connection between the turn-based and RTS phases of Global Conquest. Upgrade your headquarters and you'll notice a big difference between a Tier 1 and a Tier 3 base, not only in the units you can create—but also in how defensible your position is in the action phase.

Action Phase (RTS battles). Combat starts with the computer randomly selecting a region-appropriate map. Defense, of course, gets the home-court advantage, because the game constructs a base according to the level of your upgrades. Tier 1 setups give you the basics—a power plant, a barracks, and maybe a war factory. Impregnable Tier 3 installations come loaded with everything from hangars and secret shrines to tech centers. From there, you already know the drill—except for one small twist: random in-game missions.

A procedural mission generator switches up battles with over a dozen secondary objectives, such as stopping a convoy or grabbing outposts. Completing these objectives awards more Operation Points for the Operations Phase. Once a battle is resolved (or autoresolved by the PC), the game recalculates population and Tiberium growth before the next round begins.

It's taken several years and multiple iterations—but maybe Verdu's vision is finally coming true. • **Darren Gladstone**

SPECIAL WEAPONS AND TACTICS

GDI SHATTERER
This turtle-busting terror is an effort to combat spamming tactics in *C&C3*. If you like building out a city's worth of towers and turrets, watch out for this guy. It fires a sonic beam along the ground that's capable of toppling defenses from a safe distance.

NOD SPECTER
This stealth artillery unit remains invisible until fired. Use it in tandem with other units: Shadow Team troops can sneak behind enemy lines and leave a targeting beacon that Specters can hit from anywhere. Team up with the Awakened troops and you can stun foes and then blast away.

NOD RECKONER
Mobile transport with a twist. First, garrison four Reckoners with Tiberium Troopers and Militant Rocket Squads. When rolling, they can't shoot. Once in an enemy installation, order the deploy command. Wheels pop off and you've got four instant bunkers full of infantry.

COMMAND POINTS
These determine how much you can have in the game world (units, bases, and so on). The GDI love the blue zones, so population booms in their areas, but Tiberium needs to be imported. The Brotherhood of Nod survives in the chaos of hostile yellow zones. Scrin prosper in dangerous Tiberium-rich red zones. Play according to the *C&C* fiction, and your faction earns more command points.

ARMED FORCES

Pick your battles carefully

Carefully doling out intel, EA's ministers of information only intended to reveal the subfactions for the GDI and Brotherhood of Nod—though we managed to smuggle out the names (or codenames) for the Scrin subfactions, too. So while the GDI and Nod information here is official, consider anything regarding the Scrin as pure conjecture. When asked for confirmation, Vessella would only answer with, "Hmm...interesting theory."

GDI

SUBFACTION: Steel Talons
SPECIALTY: Armored assault
BACKGROUND: Favoring steamroller tactics, the Steel Talons rely on brute force and relatively conventional forces. Coming from the Tiberium Sun era, they don't have access to sonic technology. That doesn't stop Commander Michael "Mack" McNeil from getting some solid troops. Upgraded Juggernauts can garrison infantry, allowing for better defense; old favorites such as the Titan and Wolverine are back exclusively for the Talons; vehicles roll out with veterancy. The only downside is that they are less effective with infantry and air units.

SUBFACTION: ZOCOM (aka Zone Operations Command)
SPECIALTY: Area-of-effect attacks; suppression
BACKGROUND: ZOCOM are the sci-fi troopers equipped for the red zones. Based off the *C&C3* era and beyond, their advanced sonic technology is a great mob-attack deterrent. Shatterer tanks and ORCAs come armed with more powerful sonic attacks. Zone Troopers upgrade to Zone Raiders with an area-effect sonic cannon and antiair defenses, but they're less effective against conventional vehicles.

BROTHERHOOD OF NOD

SUBFACTION: Black Hand
SPECIALTY: Aggressive infantry
BACKGROUND: Kane's elite guard forgoes stealth in favor of heavily armed—and aggressive—infantry. The result: more powerful Black Hand units, upgraded Confessors, and an upgraded Avatar Warmech that starts with flame-throwing ability.

SUBFACTION: The Marked of Kane
SPECIALTY: Stealth assault
BACKGROUND: Kane's "chosen," modified through technology and Tiberium to the point that they are barely human. Tiberium troopers (who can damage and slow down targets) replace Black Hand units. They're not tough, but they rely on stealth and finesse to win the fight.

THE SCRIN

SUBFACTION: "Stalker-17"
SPECIALTY: Troop suppression
BACKGROUND: Possibly the remnants of the first invasion force, fighting off whomever they can and adapting their tactics to compete on Earth. New units like the Ravager show an emphasis on softening ground troops with hit-and-run strategies.

SUBFACTION: "Reaver-43"
SPECIALTY: Ground pounding
BACKGROUND: This subfaction seems to represent "big gun" support troops sent from the Scrin homeworld, as evidenced by the new Mechapede, an insectoid biomech unit that starts with only a head (though you can order up as many as eight segments during battle). Spot an incoming air force? Create an AA segment.

• **In *Rome*, you can play over 50 countries, including six major powers such as Rome, Carthage, and Egypt, or—alternatively—any of several minor "barbarian" states.**

• **The best stats don't necessarily make the best bureaucrats—if two of your chief ministers are rivals, they'll focus on each other more than their jobs.**

• **"If you want to wage war, you have to send someone to issue a formal declaration," says producer Johan Andersson. "If you send someone important and they're killed, it'll probably have huge implications for your nation.... If you send someone meaningless, you may not be taken seriously."**

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS: ROME

Explore the rise and flourish of the Roman Empire

PUBLISHER: **Paradox Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Paradox Interactive** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

All roads lead to Rome, proverbially speaking, even if they sometimes meander by way of the Crusades, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and World War II. Fans on developer Paradox's official forums (presently 84,000 members with a collective 7.1 million posts) lobbied for a "Rome" game years ago, but Paradox stalled, opting instead to hone its toolset and fortify its games' foundation. Now it's ready—finally—to tackle that famously tumultuous Mediterranean power scrabble between the catalytic First Punic War in 264 B.C. and the momentous point at which Octavian became Augustus "the autocrat," kick-starting the Pax Romana ("the Roman peace") 237 years later.

"Imagine a cross between *Europa Universalis III* and *Crusader Kings*," says producer Johan Andersson, conjuring a best-of-both-worlds approach with the former's adaptive historical event generator (key events occur only if certain conditions are met) and the latter's dynastic persona-driven system. In *Rome*, diplomacy proceeds from disposition, so if you're playing as Carthage and one of your rivals carries the "envious" trait, a sudden increase in popularity due to something like a military victory could galvanize your rival and spark a war or other political nastiness which Andersson describes as "so common in the Roman Era."

GOOD OMENS

At its core, *Rome* remains a grand strategic-history simulation inching along in continuous time. Provinces are still the system's keystone currency, taken by force or diplomacy, while governments and religion comprise the game's most influential attributes. "Each government has different bonuses and a unique mix of attainable 'idea' types, making administration even more unique than in *EU3*," says Andersson. "Religion is especially significant, since it was much more important then. Not only can you call down omens for bonuses, but people will convert to your religion if it's seen as superior."

Another way to think about *Rome* is as the inverse of something like Creative Assembly's *Rome: Total War*. While *Rome*'s strategic layer is much more sophisticated than *Total War*'s candy-thin turn-based coating, its tactical battles remain abstract throw-of-the-dice affairs, here waged between cohorts (roughly 600 men) of Militia, Heavy Infantry, Archers, Cavalry, Horse Archers, and Elephants.

Social classes now divide into slaves (provide gold), freemen (provide manpower), and citizens (provide research points), while "aristocrats and priests are out because they were such a small percentage of the population," says Andersson. Don't look for a 300-strong Roman senate, either. Paradox opted instead to focus on the most important Roman families, which Andersson claims "gives you the same effect by simply modeling the rivalries between those families."

Paradox's biggest challenge before the game ships next year? "Trying to simulate the civil wars seen in the era, and more importantly, the gradual shift from troops loyal to the senate and people of Rome to troops loyal to a general like Sulla or Marius," says Andersson. "We think our eventual solution is going to be pretty cool." • **Matt Peckham**

THE WITCHER

— ROLE-PLAYING GAME —

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CULTURE

Before *Doom*, before *Mario Bros.*, before *Frogger*, *Donkey Kong*, and even *Pac-Man*, gamers had 1975's *Colossal Cave Adventure*.

Compared to modern titles, programmer Will Crowther and grad student Don Woods' cave-crawling fantasy game doesn't seem like much. With its command line interface and humble blocks of text, *Colossal Cave Adventure* didn't offer players a fancy physics engine or complex character trees—it didn't even have graphics. It was just you and the text, teasing your imagination with two-word commands and elaborate descriptions of caves uncharted and depths unplumbed.

It was freakin' *awesome*.

Most gamers have heard of old text adventures like *CCA*—and maybe even played a few like *Zork* or *A Mind Forever Voyaging*. But it's been so long since text-based games sat on store shelves that it seems graphics have irrevocably killed the command line star.

But text-based gaming never died; it just went underground. On the Internet, the genre thrived and matured—and yesterday's text adventure evolved into today's interactive fiction (IF), a style more literary and experimental than anything released back in the disco days. Now, with the indie PC-gaming movement starting to surge, the joy of text is poised to make a comeback in a big way.

YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

When *Colossal Cave Adventure* first appeared on ARPANET (the proto-Internet) in 1975, the game snowballed into a genuine phenomenon, ushering in a decade of commercial fortune for text-based gaming. Success was all in the timing: Home PCs were finally small and affordable enough to appeal to middle-class consumers, and by the late 1970s and early '80s, computers like the Tandy TRS-80 and Apple II were the new geek must-haves.

Several gaming companies pounced on this new market, but none were so successful as Cambridge, MA–based Infocom, America's first Goliath gaming company. Their flagship title, *Zork*, sold more than 1 million copies across several PC platforms—staggering numbers for the early 1980s. The *Zork* series remained perched atop best-seller lists for years, and the company eventually released over 35 games, building a creative empire that's still the rival of many development studios today.

But a combination of poor business choices and a growing public thirst for graphical games put Infocom in dire straits. Activision bought the company in 1986 and closed it down three years later, effectively ending the commercial reign of text adventures forever.

Instead of letting the genre die, however, fans took it back to where it came from: the Internet. Text adventures fit naturally into the online landscape of the late 1980s, a thicket of MUDs, BBSes, and command line interfaces. It wasn't long before texties had formed two USENET newsgroups dedicated to text adventures, rec.arts.int-fiction and rec.games.int-fiction, which still serve as nexus points for the IF community today. In addition, several amateur coders released free programming languages specifically designed with text-based gaming in mind, making it much easier for fans to write their own games. Soon, a vibrant, if small, homebrew IF community coalesced online.

As the community grew, so did its games, which began to adopt a headier, more intellectual style than their Infocom predecessors. Slowly, the genre evolved from simplistic dungeon-crawlers written in complete sentences to fully malleable short stories including literary allusions, complex plots, and multipath dialogue with NPCs.

"With commercial pressures gone, there's been a lot more consciously literary games," says Stephen Granade, IF author and founder of the adventure-gaming website BrassLantern.org. "That's not to say that every game is an exercise in high-art techniques. But the field is wide open now." >

INTERACTIVE FICTION 101

"You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here."

Don't recognize it? Those are the opening lines of *Zork*, one of the most famous videogames ever created—and the first commercially successful interactive fiction title. But what does that even *mean*? What is this interactive fiction stuff all about?

Playing interactive fiction is a lot like becoming the main character of a book or short story. Most games begin with some descriptive text that establishes the setting, the plot, and your role as the protagonist, and you type directions into a command line interface to determine where the story should go next.

Unlike in most games, you have a huge range of potential actions at your disposal—nearly anything you can come up with, from "GO WEST" or "READ DIARY" to "JUMP IN PILE OF LEAVES" and "HIT TROLL WITH 9-IRON." In fact, most of the fun comes from exploring just what you can and can't do; the programmers might even surprise you with what they thought of. For example, in the Infocom mystery game *Deadline*, you can kill suspects, read an in-game novelization of the story, and even accuse a toilet of murder.

Works of interactive fiction, like graphical adventures, are generally puzzle-driven. But unlike many contemporary adventure games where you must fetch pieces of a nonsensically broken key to progress or combine items through *MacGyver*-esque leaps of intuition, IF puzzles tend to be more organically woven into the plot.

(Not always, though. Take Infocom's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, where you have to figure out how to catch a ricocheting Babel Fish as it ejects from a vending machine. The solution involves cleaning robots, a dressing gown, and the precise placement of junk mail on top of a briefcase.)

So if you love a good story and you think your rusty imagination could use some exercise, you might want to give interactive fiction a try. Go on, give your inner lit geek a break. Graphics are *so* overrated, anyway.

As Infocom's early ads showed, they didn't need no stinkin' graphics.

COMPETITIVE TEXT

Granade is also the organizer of the most anticipated event in the IF community today, the Annual Interactive Fiction Competition (IF Comp). Now in its 13th year, the contest promotes new short-form interactive fiction in a range of genres that encompass everything from traditional sci-fi and fantasy epics to espionage thrillers, comedies, and chick lit. Anyone can enter as long as their game is solvable in under two hours; thus, the IF Comp boasts the largest online collection of new games from established and novice authors alike. In fact, with only 29 entries, the 2007 IF Comp is a slow year; some IF Comps have drawn more than 50 entries.

The competition got its start in 1995, when college student and text-adventure author Kevin Wilson organized a writing contest for the IF newsgroups, one that would showcase the power of Inform, a recently released programming language. But Wilson's goals went beyond scoring publicity. "IF as a hobby cannot survive," he wrote in his 1995 announcement, "unless there are people out there writing and playing it."

That first year, the IF Comp attracted only 12 entries, most of which were obvious riffs on Infocom's writing style and puzzlecentric gameplay. But the contest still managed to snag the attention of Activision's Laird Malamed, who was so impressed that he offered to include the top three games in the company's 1996 Infocom compilation, *Classic Text Adventure Masterpieces: Infocom*.

Since then, the IF Comp has continued to bloom in popularity, and "the competition provides a great sense of occasion and excitement," says Emily Short, author of last year's winning game, *Floatpoint*. Annually, the contest attracts attention from Slashdot and Blue's News, as well as mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Granade estimates that each contest entry gets downloaded an average of 1,000 to 2,000 times (more for the winners); that may not sound like much, but for an indie-gaming contest focusing on a commercially dead genre, that's not half bad.

In an effort to continue luring new IF fans, this year Granade's lifted the ban on public discussion of competition games during the judging period (the spoiler restriction had been in effect since 1995). "The ban was done with the best of intentions," he says, "but it's like, we have this great competition, and we want everyone to play the games, but nobody can say anything about them for six weeks? That sort of kills the momentum."

THE SPRING THING FLING

The IF Comp's popularity has its downsides. So much community attention is lavished on the contest, says Granade, that games released outside the event are often ignored completely. The IF Comp "tends to distort the landscape around itself," he says. "All the attention gets focused on it, and a lot of people enter whether they're ready to or not."

"It's a bit sad that a lot of authors feel it's not worth writing a game unless it's going into the competition," agrees Short.

As a side effect, longer and more complex games, which might take anywhere from five to 50 hours to complete, have nearly vanished from the contemporary IF scene. Few authors want to dedicate time to a game that will surely be overlooked. "Ten years ago, I wrote an Infocom-length game," says Granade. "I wouldn't dream of doing that today."

A partial solution exists in the Spring Thing, a sister competition to the IF Comp that focuses on medium-sized works. Held in April, the Spring Thing has no length restriction for entries, but the rules require authors to pay an entrance fee, which is effective in weeding out those whose games might not be ready for mass consumption. But uneven publicity and a 2004 hiatus have kept the Spring Thing from achieving a community presence similar to that of the IF Comp.

PARSING THE COMMUNITY

Inarguably, IF and its authors have come a long way since the 1980s. "Infocom has been dead for 20 years," says Granade. "We've got young members of the community who weren't even alive when Infocom was a going concern. The community has definitely matured."

And it continues to evolve, especially as indie gaming reaches a critical mass. In recent years, the IF community's reached out to similarly minded groups, like the "games as art" movement and new-media critics. "It's become less insular. There's more attention paid to other independent-gaming communities and also to academic work," says Short. "I don't know whether that will continue," she says, "but I hope it does." **Lara Crigger**

>HINT

Don't know where to start your interactive-fiction quest? Here are some of our favorite dispensers of that old-time textual healing.

You can download hundreds of games, interpreters, and emulators directly from the comprehensive **IF Archive** (www.ifarchive.org) or the infinitely more navigable **Baf's Guide to the Interactive Fiction Archive** (www.wurb.com/if). Baf's has a handy search function that allows you to hunt for games by title, author, and genre; each listing includes a summary, reviews, download links, and sometimes even author-written walkthroughs.

In addition, the **IF Comp** archives (www.ifcomp.org) offer an excellent selection of the newest, most talked-about titles. You can download entries from the past 13 years, either individually or by year, on the archived competition pages—and it's a great place to go if you're an IF novice and want to test out something short.

On the other hand, if you'd like something meatier, check out the **Spring Thing** (www.springthing.net). Games here have no time restrictions and tend to be of relatively high quality.

Should you find an author you like, you can also visit individual writers' webpages to browse their complete works. For example, **Emily Short** posts her games on her blog, www.emshort.wordpress.com, where she also writes articles about interactive fiction theory and appreciation. **Scott Adams**, author of *Adventureland* and cofounder of Adventure International, has released most of his company's old games as freeware at www.msadams.com. And don't forget **Home of the Underdogs** (www.the-underdogs.info), which offers an archive of hundreds of old-school adventure games for free download.

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THE FREELOADER PRESENTS

FREE PLAY

The best games that money can't buy

COLUMN

The Freeloader

Know about some sweet free games? Tip off our resident mooch! Freeloader@ziffdavis.com is the best way to reach him.

I feel like a complete tool right now. A roadie for Fisher-Price. I've got four toy guitars on the back wall of the room and one more strapped around my waist. Standing knee-deep in game boxes, this situation hardly screams "rock star." Yet, here I am shredding with my fake ax in front of the TV.

But how come there aren't more music and rhythm games for the PC? I managed to dig up three free music games that rock the house, but I couldn't come up with (OK, so I was too lazy to come up with) a fourth rhythm game, so I found a fun bit of freeware with an incredibly strange music track instead. That counts for something, right? • The Freeloader

RAGNARAWK

FILE UNDER: **Rhythmic RPG** URL: **www.daretobedigital.com/showcase/2007.php (registration required)**

Let me get this out of the way: *Ragnarawk* is a guitar-playing RPG—yes, a GuitaRPG. (I'll be trademarking that later.). It's a crazy mashup of Capcom's *Puzzle Fighter* series, the *Guitar Hero* games (it works with a *Guitar Hero* controller and gamepad), and a role-playing game where you level up your lead guitar hero—that's awesome *cubed*.

Awesome assuming you're not playing in Vista, anyway—where, after a download that seems to take forever, the game doesn't recognize any guitars and works only half-assedly with a gamepad. I stalked Malcolm Brown, one of the guys behind the game (see right), and he says he hopes to fix the problem soon, explaining that he and his cohorts at Voodoo Boogy were in a rush to finish for the Dare to be Digital game-design competition (www.daretobedigital.com). Excuses, excuses.

Until then, it's time to switch back to Windows XP and plug in a PlayStation 2 *Guitar Hero* controller with a USB adapter. Would you believe I went through all this trouble just to play a game? No regrets here, though. The game rocks. You control a guitarist name Rift who battles other musicians, trying to prove that rock beats classical—and every other style of music. Your backup band consists of ancient god of rock Stratos, who teaches you special-attack moves (think the battle mode from *Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock*), and your one fan, Save Girl, who teaches you a life lesson: Do it for the groupies! >

XTRAS

FREE GAMES!

You'll find all these games (and more) at FileFront.com. Plus, visit the new online Weekly Free Play column at GFW13.1UP.com.

FileFront

CREATOR'S CORNER

Malcolm Brown and his Voodoo Boogy posse had 10 weeks to make Ragnarawk. Think that's grueling? Try talking to me.

GFW: How'd you come up with *Ragnarawk* in the first place?
MB: We had several ideas originally. One of them was a dancing, rhythmic game. In it, you'd battle opponents by dancing against them. Eventually, we came up with something decidedly "cooler"—guitar battles.

GFW: Good call, but a guitar RPG? That's just a stroke of genius.
MB: Well, we had a number of inspirations. Besides various music games and pop-cultural elements like Tenacious D, we drew a lot from Eastern RPGs like *Final Fantasy* or *Zelda*.

GFW: Well, I know that people are digging it. You've already gotten two awards. Is success going to your head?
MB: It's great to have so many people interested in our idea, and we'd love to make it a full game. We've had many people asking us when the game is going to be released publicly, and the answer is: "Well, we hope at some point in the future."

GFW: So you're looking to go full-time and turn *Ragnarawk* into a retail game?
MB: It was difficult to pull off such a project in only 10 weeks, and there was plenty that we had to remove to make deadlines, but we're really proud of what we ended up with. At this point, we're hoping to get enough attention so that we can get some help from a publisher.

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ROCKTROPOLIS

FILE UNDER: **Walk and Roll** URL: **http://games.rit.edu/student_work/2d**

Still got that PS2 *Guitar Hero* controller plugged into your PC? Well, I got another rhythm game for ya to play—a short, guitar-riffing side-scroller called *Rocktropolis*, created by students at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Apparently, in some sleepy burb somewhere, a spiky-haired rebel walks down the street with his guitar doing all sorts of rebellious things. Like walking. And rocking. Maybe they shoulda just called this game *Rock 'n' Stroll*.

As our angry, punky, disaffected musical antihero roams the streets, a colored fret board flows music along the bottom of the screen. Match the notes, strum, and repeat. Oh, and some good news for the few among you that don't have a plastic toy guitar on hand: You can use the keyboard to play this. It's a little more annoying, and you hardly look like a rock 'n' roll rebel, but hey, at least it works.

OSU!

FILE UNDER: **Elite Beat PC** URL: **http://osu.ppy.sh**

My buddy owns a Nintendo DS that he refuses to put down. He's stuck on some game called *Elite Beat Agents*. I had absolutely no idea what the big deal was—who the heck wants to bash onscreen buttons to the music?—until I played it. I was *this* close to buying a DS of my own when it hit me: If a game is this much fun, someone must've figured out a way to make a free version of it. That's exactly what *Osu!* is.

But *Osu!*'s more than just an *Elite Beat* clone for your PC—it's also an editor. People are online, right now, making their own music videos and creating stuff for me to play. That's, like, free times 20! The game is a work in progress with new stuff getting added all the time (such as online leaderboards). The only sucktastic thing about *Osu!* is that you've got to move your mouse to the beat instead of a stylus. I was frantically trying to zip my mouse all across the screen just to catch up with the beat.

BEAR GO HOME

FILE UNDER: **Bear-able** URL: **www.daretobedigital.com/showcase/2007.php (registration required)**

So this cute, cuddly bear is walking through the woods, just trying to get home. Your job: Help our fuzzy little friend get there...without actually moving him. Yep, *Bear Go Home* is one of those wacky—and truly awesome—"concept games." Instead of pressing the left arrow key to move the bear left or Control to make him crawl, you snap his tail to jump, squash his head down to fit in tight spaces, or yank open his mouth to catch falling berries. Think Winnie the Pooh on acid. You're probably wondering how some playable, triptastic children's book fits in with our musical month of freeware. Well, you'll just have to trust me on this one: *Bear Go Home*'s soundtrack is downright creepy, featuring a couple of girls singing nursery rhymes and humming tunes. It's been haunting my dreams for a few days now.

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!

Cough it up, cheapo. Yeah, I'm talking to you. Month after month, we keep glomming free games from the sweat of countless computer programmers that want nothing more than to make you happy. OK, and maybe make themselves a little extra money while they're at it. This is where you come in. Open up your wallet, grab that credit card, and at least consider kicking a little cash to some deserving developers. And what deserves a couple of dollars this month? A rough-around-the-edges action-RPG called *Scallywag: In the Lair of the Medusa*.

Before I begin rambling about the game myself, the description at developer Chronic Reality's homepage (www.chronicreality.co.uk) sums up the plot: "Get drunk, bash zombies, do 'shrooms, get mashed, grab loot, get poisoned, get lost, get found, burn oil, be clever, be quick, be hung over, be a werewolf, learn to fly, smoke fungus, be invisible, get diseased, learn magic, explore worlds, start a tramp, become a scallywag."

Honestly, I couldn't have said it any better myself. It's an old-school *Rogue*-like dungeon crawl with a sketchy art style. Think back to that rebel arty kid in school. He'd sit in the back of the class and draw crazy adventures about the teachers. Well, this game looks a lot like you're moving those notebook drawings around a dungeon. Run around, loot the place, and get out before you run out of lamp oil. Simple as that. Oh, and for those looking to stretch your gaming dollar: You can mod *Scallywag*. The Random Adventure Engine is highly customizable. I'm already playing the undead-slaying mod *Zombie Fest*. Is all this worth the $30 asking price? Download the demo and see for yourself.

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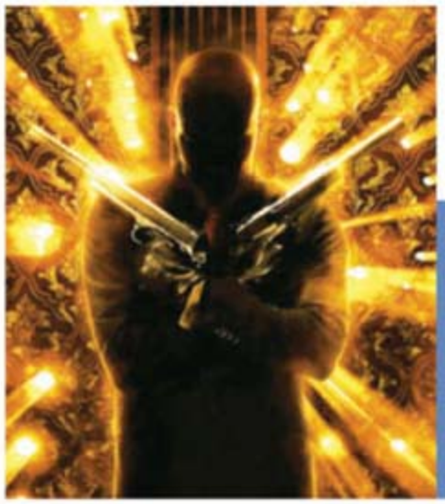
RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month



1 HITMAN

For anyone running the odds on video-game-based movies, the record right now is something like 0-15. That won't stop us from checking out *Deadwood*'s Timothy Olyphant as Agent 47, that "lovable" bald assassin from *Hitman*. Never played the open-ended assassination series? A sweet promotion at GameTap (www.gametap.com) lets you play for free.

2 IN THE BAG

Running out to the local LAN party, you have the keyboard in one hand, a sixer (of Red Bull, right?) in the other. The industrious nerd fashionistas at Dust-Off created the $70 Keyboard Quiver—a LAN party backpack that holds everything you'll need.

3 CREATIVE CONTROL

If you hate the graphics in *Drawn to Life*, you only have yourself to blame. This creative little DS game lets you sketch your characters on the touch screen. Just...uh... try to keep it clean, OK?

4 WEEKDAY WARRIORS

Those guys who run off rock climbing for the weekend seem all tough? Total wusses. Go Viking on their asses back at work with these foam latex Office Warrior Weapons from ThinkGeek (www.thinkgeek.com). Arm up to raid the mailroom.

5 WEB ADVENTURE

For those who fondly remember the classic *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, one intrepid designer created his own version online. Visit www.rey-o.com/adventureWEB/reysiteADVENTUREGOcover.html.

6 I DREAM OF BILL

Isn't Bill Gates dreamy? Just check out his mack pose on this T-shirt from G8's new line of geekcentric gear. Can nerd clothes be cool? Savor it—and more—at www.g8brand.com.

7 AESOP ROCK

Rock's style evolves in his newest album, *None Shall Pass*. He's packed so many head-nodders and complex lyrics into this set that you'll wonder how he stayed an underground artist for so long.

8 MASS EFFECT

Yeah, we're a little bummed this sci-fi RPG isn't coming to the PC, but that doesn't mean we're not gonna play BioWare's next epic. Hell, we might even read the prequel novel.

9 ZOMBIES!

Halloween's come and gone, but that doesn't stop us from finding new ways to appreciate the living dead. The zombie-filled Flash game *The Last Stand* (www.freewebarcade.com/game/the-last-stand) should give you serious *28 Weeks Later* (now on DVD—grab it!) flashbacks.

10 NEVER SAY NEVER

Honestly, it was gonna take a lot for us to get back into *Neverwinter Nights 2*. Then we started playing the expansion *Mask of the Betrayer*. Not only does it fix problems we had with the original, it adds a little something we like to call "fun."

DEVELOPER DESKTOPS

Jess Lebow, the wordsmith behind *Guild Wars*, currently sails under Flying Labs' flag as the lead writer and content designer for *Pirates of the Burning Sea*. When he's not at sea—or on the road—what's he into?

GADGETS

"I honestly don't know if I could live without the portable MyFi XM Radio. I listen to it just about everywhere. I'll listen in the car. When I get home, I plug it into the stereo. The cool thing is that it records five hours of music, so I have a completely new playlist every day."

MUSIC

"I'm into old-school Pacific Northwest grunge music like Mudhoney and The Young Fresh Fellows... and I really like the new Foo Fighters album. It's funny—I used to see Nirvana all the time—they played around my college."

STOGIES

"I have these cigars called Pinar 3000s made from pre-embargo Cuban tobacco. Funny thing is that 50 years ago this stuff was considered pretty low-grade. The way it sat and aged, it's good now—I just need to leave them in a humidor for about a year but they are great."

COOKING

"I do a lot of cooking. I have this great little tabletop smoker at home and can put together some mean barbecues with it."

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

"I'm about to start in on an old-school D&D campaign—I mean *Rules Cyclopedia* old-school. I think that's my favorite edition of D&D. Best memories at least."

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Games for Windows

Ten titles that will define PC gaming next year

TOP TEN

2008

2007's not even over, but gamers' attention spans are always two steps ahead of the current big thing—so in between rounds of *Team Fortress 2*, we scribbled a list of what we want to play next year once we're sick of our existing embarrassment of riches. And while we hardly have a complete picture of 2008—game announcements will continue well into the new year—we figured these 10 games are a darn good place to start.

As we were compiling our list, it occurred to us that five of the 10 games on our list will appear on multiple platforms. In an era when BioWare's big holiday RPG is an Xbox 360 exclusive and a team-based multiplayer shooter from Valve enjoys a simultaneous console release, it's far less clear than it was even a few years ago what makes PC gaming so special.

So flip the page and take a look at what could go right, what could go wrong, and what you may not know about next year's biggest releases—and what we think it says about the current state of computer gaming. • The Editors of *GFW*

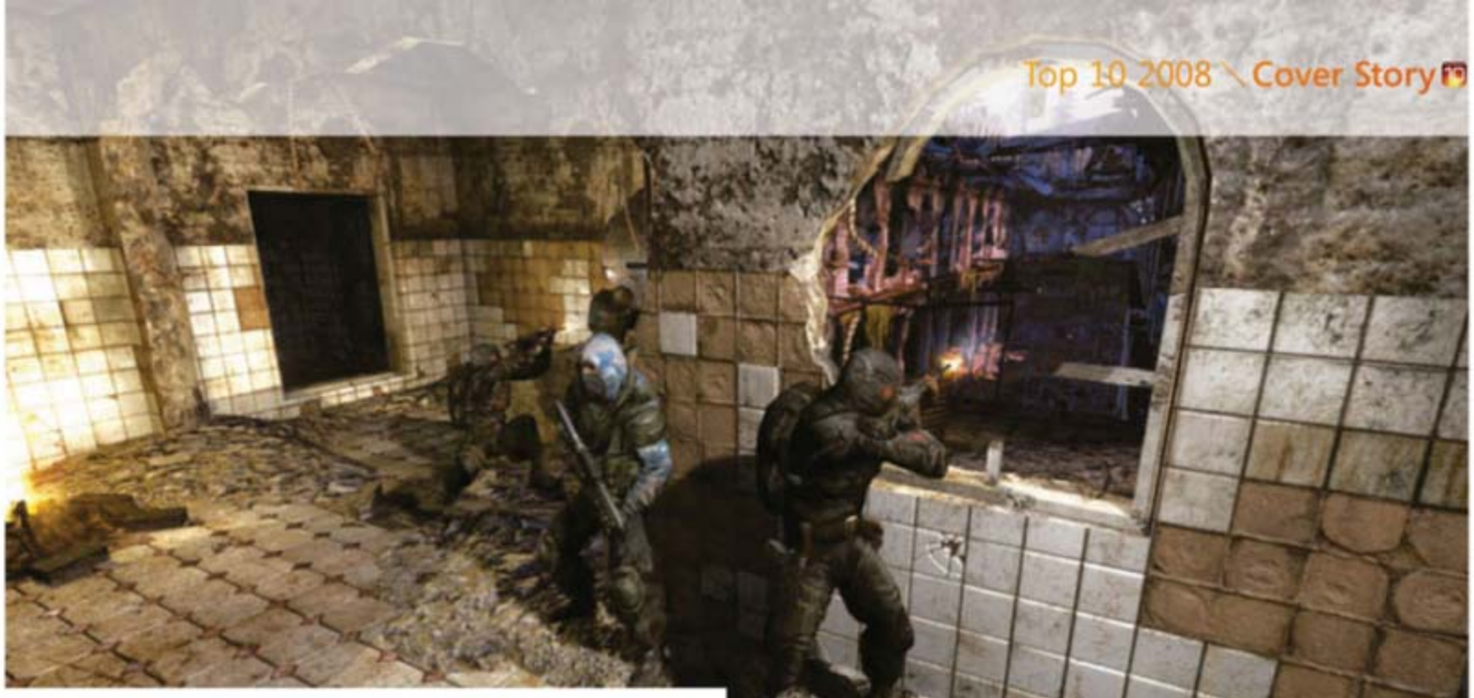
PUBLISHER: **Bethesda Softworks** DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks** GENRE: **Role-Playing Game**

FALLOUT 3

10 **THE GOOD + THE BAD:** The last *Fallout* game came out 10 years ago, so you are forgiven, sort of, if you don't quite know what the big deal is. For those who did play these classic RPGs, set in a burned-out, mutant-filled, postapocalyptic 22nd-century California, the very idea of a *Fallout 3* has been one of PC gaming's holy grails. When the original developers moved on and the publisher flamed out, it seemed like the franchise might be gone forever. So it was huge news when veteran PC RPG developers Bethesda Softworks—makers of *Oblivion*, our 2006 Game of the Year—announced that they had acquired the rights and were, at last, going to deliver a third *Fallout* game. Since the announcement and the first early previews, the reaction to *Fallout 3* has been all over the map. Some gamers (including us) are thrilled by how faithfully Bethesda is preserving the look and tone of the old games while bringing the franchise into the current millennium, while others (especially some of the more rabid *Fallout* fan communities) continue to deride every new fact, screen, or random piece of info that comes out of Bethesda about the game. The truth of the matter is that no one knows a damn thing yet about whether the game will be good or not. Everything crucial to the success of this game ("success" being measured partially in terms of how much it lives up to the series' pedigree)—the storyline, the combat system, the dialogue—is still a huge unknown. Not that there's any reason to be defensive. Bethesda has been making great RPGs since the original *Fallouts* were around. They love the old games, just like you do. And if *Fallout 3* sucks, they'll be letting themselves down along with everyone else. And we do like what we've seen—so for now, we're keeping hope alive, and keeping *Fallout 3* on this list.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: "We can confirm that, yes, you can have a dog," says VP of public relations and marketing Pete Hines, "and yes, his name is Dogmeat."

THE PC FACTOR: *Fallout 3* is being developed from the ground up as a multiplatform title for PC, Xbox 360, and PS3. Don't fret, though. What this means is that, as they did with *Oblivion*, Bethesda is customizing the entire experience and user interface for each particular platform. You're not going to be playing a console port. • **Jeff Green**



PUBLISHER: **TBD** DEVELOPER: **GSC Game World** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: CLEAR SKY

10 THE GOOD + THE BAD: Despite the scrutiny and cynicism that accompanied *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*'s four-year delay, GSC Game World's unconventional FPS/RPG hybrid won a lot of fans. We lauded it for daring to assume gamers don't need (or want) big flashing arrows guiding their way—a design philosophy so old it almost seems new again.

GSC Game World's senior PR manager, Oleg Yavorsky, says they've learned a lot in assembling the first title (aside from creative ways to miss deadlines). *Clear Sky* begins a year prior to the events in the original game, filling in story gaps left unanswered—or unexplained—the first time around. Beyond the storyline, you can join any of the eight factions fighting for territory, resources, and technology. The A.I. constantly wages a postfallout turf war against itself, so at some point you will stumble into the middle of a firefight. Think of it like a control point–based multiplayer game going on around you with the option to join a side or steer clear.

We still remember when *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* was a showcase game for DirectX 8, but *Clear Sky* promises to take advantage of current tech: improved physics (environments crumbling around you midfight), advanced parallax texture mapping details for DX9, and support for DX10.

We're not sweating the sometimes laughably lost-in-translation conversations or almost inevitable delay. The only thing we're worried about (aside from the lack of a U.S. publisher) is GSC's QA track record. Monumental patches and game-crashing bugs—both of which figured prominently in the first game's launch—can kill lots of goodwill.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: "Expect to see pitch-dark nights in wilder anomalous zones where S.T.A.L.K.E.R.s and creatures behave differently," says Yavorsky. *Clear Sky* introduces a two-handed HUD to enhance the mood: At night, you're packing heat in one hand a flashlight in the other. The light shows the way and will hopefully scare off some of the new nocturnal predators—and makes for two distinct experiences depending on whether you're tramping around during daytime or night.

THE PC FACTOR: You can always count on Eastern European developers to be PC gamers at heart, so no worries—quirky shooters like this are 100 percent PC turf.

• **Darren Gladstone**

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**

FAR CRY 2

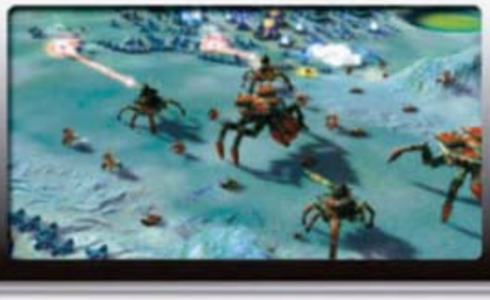
10 **THE GOOD + THE BAD:** Crytek may be off to high-tech, sci-fi pastures—but that doesn't mean we're afraid of how inheriting developer Ubisoft Montreal is handling *Far Cry 2*. Trading tropical islands for African plains, the FPS calls to mind a shinier *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, where the rails are wide and reputations let you choose which causes to fight for (and, in turn, which allies fight for you). The game's malaria gimmick—pop your pills regularly, if you have some, or get knocked cold—leaves us a bit jittery, though, and may show symptoms of schizophrenia: The developers say "sandbox," but we're less wont to explore the dark corners of Africa with a nervous-system shutdown timer ticking down.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: Says producer Louis-Pierre Pharand: "One day in Africa while trying to collect natural sounds from the savanna region to implement in *Far Cry 2*, we were nearly attacked by lions. So to protect our sound designer, he was accompanied by two armed guards for the remainder of the trip while he stood in the middle of the savanna to capture the organic sounds."

THE PC FACTOR: "Our mandate from day one was to make a top-tier PC title to reestablish Ubisoft in the PC gaming market," said creative director Clint Hocking back in our October 2007 issue (*GFW* #11, pg. 28), "as well as to make a real, true PC sequel to *Far Cry*." It's an admission that leaves us (possibly a tad too) optimistic: Ubisoft knew they'd let a market slip away that they probably shouldn't have, and they recognized that console FPS *Far Cry* variants like *Instincts* are indeed made for a different sort of audience. Good signs, both. • **Sean Molloy**

STRATEGY ON A REVOLUTIONARY SCALE

SUPREME COMMANDER
Forged Alliance



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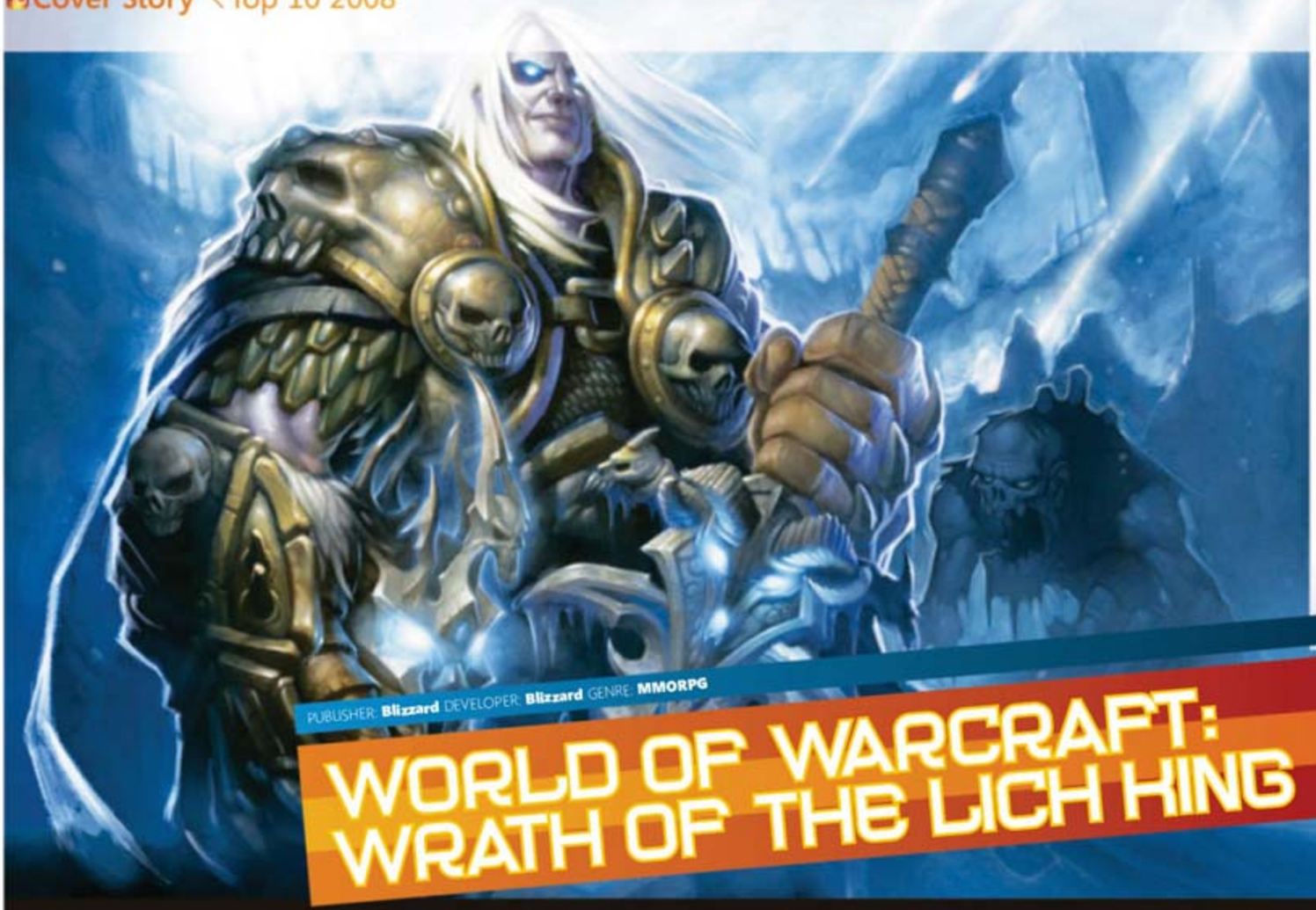


PUBLISHER: **Blizzard** DEVELOPER: **Blizzard** GENRE: **MMORPG**

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING

10 THE GOOD + THE BAD: Apparently, 9 million people are enough. That's the message *World of WarCraft*'s second retail expansion sends, as it focuses entirely on content for veterans with max-level characters, offering nothing new for noobs. If you're already hooked, that's exactly what you want to hear: Hero Classes, more 10-man raids, and siege weapons to add some spice to PVP. If you're not already hooked—well, there's already 70 levels worth of MMO to play.

A small shard of our soul worries that icy Northrend, despite Blizzard's assurances that it won't all look like Plaguelands: Antarctica, might be a little mundane after the outland-ish landscape of Outland. But *Lich King* looks loaded with content—as with *Burning Crusade*, this expansion appears to have more mass than some other entire MMOs—but we fear that one more 10-level grind and raid-progression ladder may be all we have left for Azeroth. After we down Arthas, we wouldn't mind a bit if Blizzard shifted to smaller, more frequent expansions.

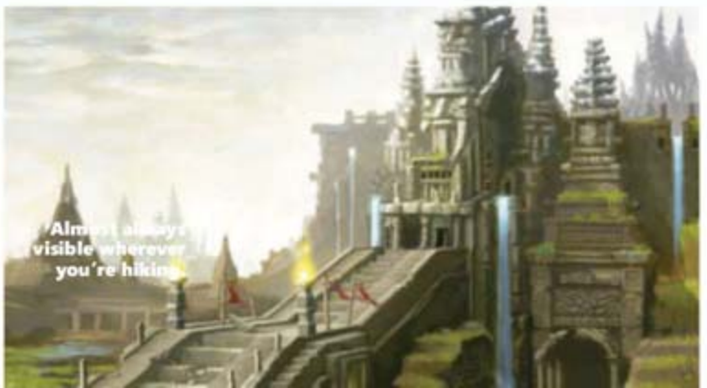
SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: "Drak'Tharon Keep is near Dalaran, the central city of Northrend," says lead game designer Jeff Kaplan, "and is nestled on the borders of Grizzly Hills and Zul'Drak in similar fashion as Blackrock Mountain is to Searing Gorge and Burning Steppes. Zul'Drak is a massive outdoor zone—roughly the same size as Shadowmoon Valley—and is the former home of the Ice Trolls. Drak'Tharon Keep has two separate instanced portions, with one located in Grizzly Hills and targeted for level 72 to level 74 players, and the other accessed from Zul'Drak and intended for level 74 to level 76. Both instances can also be set to Heroic difficulty for max-level players."

If you're into the whole lore thing, Drak'Tharon Keep also happens to be where mad ol' Arthas, *Wrath of the Lich King*'s prime antagonist, first found the wicked sword Frostmourne—the cursed blade that turned him to the dark side. Suffice it to say, the place is probably swarming with the undead.

• Drak'Tharon Keep has two entrances in two different zones, including Zul'Drak (pictured).

THE PC FACTOR: Love it or hate it, *WOW* is the poster child for PC gaming these days. In fact, excluding anomalies such as *Final Fantasy XI* (released on PS2 and Xbox 360 in addition to PC), MMOs are the last great bastion of PC exclusivity, thanks to the unappealing restrictions of Microsoft's closed-network Xbox Live service and the PlayStation 3's comparatively small user base. Times will change, we're sure. **• Sean Molloy**

• We're betting there are some Scourge inside Drak'Tharon.



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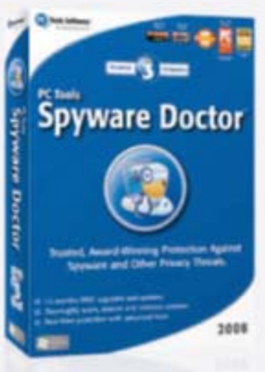

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•Monolith has nothing to fear but *F.E.A.R.* itself.

PUBLISHER: **Warner Brothers** DEVELOPER: **Monolith** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**

PROJECT ORIGIN

10 **THE GOOD + THE BAD:** A sequel to Monolith's 2005 shooter *F.E.A.R.*, *Project Origin* continues everything from the original except its name, which was lost to *F.E.A.R.*'s publisher, Vivendi. The game's singular combat, revolving around highly sophisticated A.I. enemies who behave in unpredictable and endlessly entertaining ways, cramped indoor environments, and mountains of destructible environmental details, will arrive intact and improved. The game's narrative, however, could suffer from a strange midstory change in characters: The already vague player character of "Point Man" is replaced by an entirely anonymous Delta Force badass whose story runs parallel to the original plot, or at least the last 30 minutes thereof. If you had trouble keeping the various arcs of psychic/military mumbo jumbo straight before, *Project Origin* probably won't clear things up.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: "One cool thing about doing a game with realistic settings is that we hire a Hollywood location scout to find us interesting locales that we want to put into our game," says producer Troy Skinner. "Our level designers, artists, and sound engineers travel to the locations with the scout and capture photo, video, and audio reference. On one outing, our lead game designer, John Mulkey, was being toured around the creepy basement of an insane asylum when he asked, as a joke, if there had ever been any crazy goings on down in the asylum's basement. The tour-guide hesitantly replied, 'Well...there is the ghost nurse that haunts the place. She seems to like the basement.' If that wasn't bad enough, John turned around after taking a series of pictures, to find out that the tour guide had left the area. He downplays it now, but we thought we heard some weeping sounds on his video footage."

THE PC FACTOR: Monolith proved their PC chops with the original *F.E.A.R.*, and *Project Origin* will likely follow suit. It's interesting to note, however, that the game's publisher considers the Xbox 360 version to be the lead product. • **Shawn Elliott**

2008 WILD CARDS

• **Gearbox (*Brothers in Arms*, *Borderlands*) is working on a game based on *Aliens*. Awesome.**

• ***City of Heroes* developer Cryptic Studios and comic-book empire Marvel once battled it out in court; now they've made up and formed their own dynamic MMO duo.**

• ***Empire: Total War* takes its trademark real-time battles from the land to the sea.**

Some upcoming games were just too nebulous to be included on this year's list—but gosh darn it, we're looking forward to them anyway.

Two long-in-development MMOs based on the two big superhero universes are starting to become real: The tentatively titled ***Marvel Universe Online*** is being made by Cryptic Studios, the *City of Heroes* guys. (And if we can play as the X-Statix's Doop, we're calling GOTY right now.) Meanwhile, Sony Online is teaming up with DC and Warner Bros. for an **MMO based on the DC Universe**, which also has legendary comic artist Jim Lee on board as executive producer. Two others MMOs: A **Warhammer 40K MMO**, being published by THQ, who has already done great things with the *40K Dawn of War* series, as well as the long-rumored, not-yet-actually-confirmed ***Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic Online*** being helmed by BioWare. It sounds too good to be true, so it probably is.

Back in the real world, NCsoft and ArenaNet are prepping ***Guild Wars 2***. Valve is, of course, hard at work on ***Half-Life 2: Episode 3*** and have the daunting task of coming up with something cooler than *The Orange Box*. Ace developer Gearbox and Sega have an ***Aliens*** game in the works, while ***Empire: Total War***, the latest in Creative Assembly's always smart historical strategy series, introduces real-time naval combat. More strategy: Stardock, maker of the awesome *Galactic Civilizations II*, is working on **an as-yet-untitled fantasy-strategy game** rumored to be modeled after *Master of Magic*. Finally, rumors swirl that ***Battlefield 3***, the next installment of EA's flagship multiplayer shooter series, will hit in 2008, too.

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Gearbox** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**

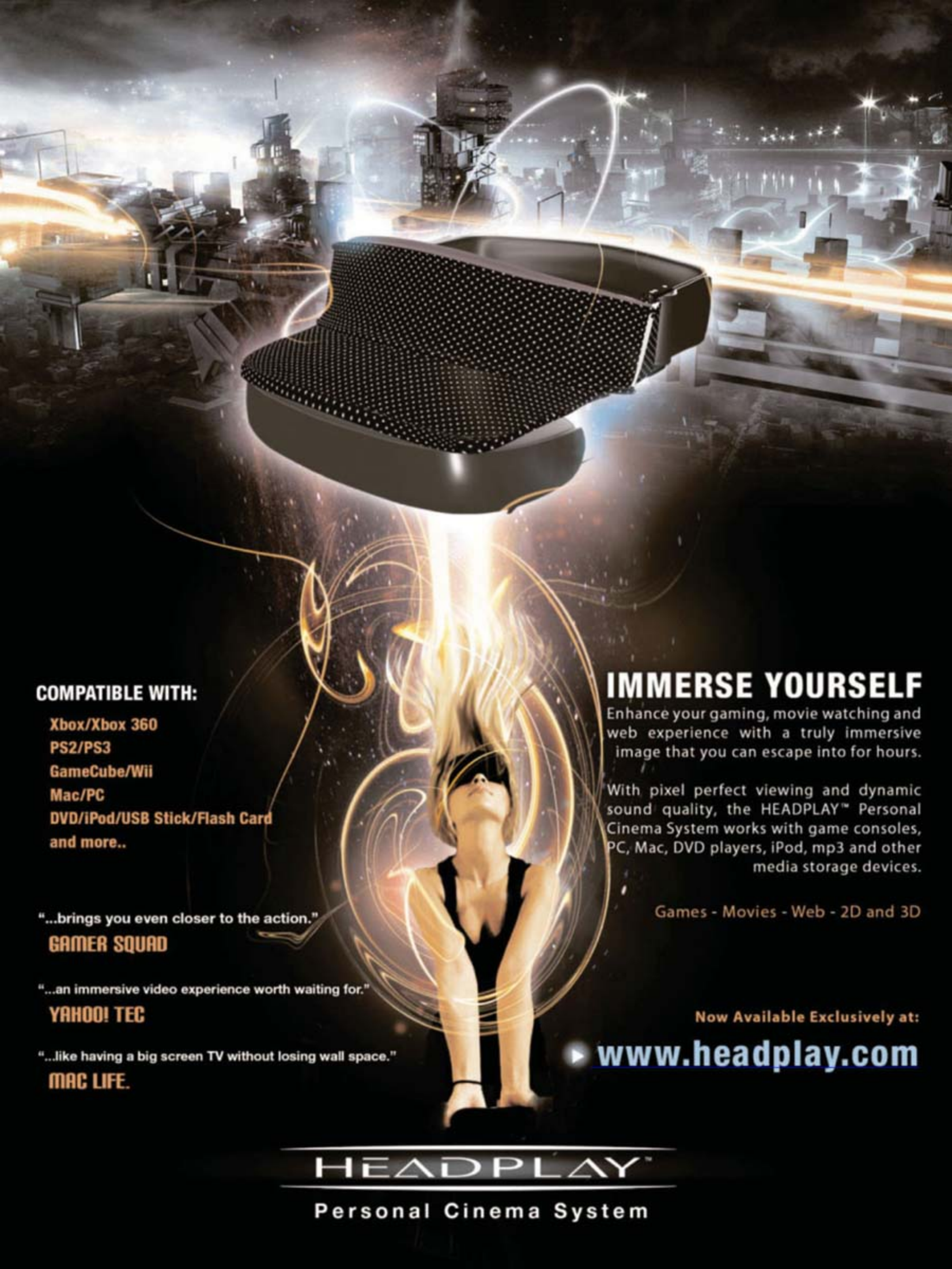
BORDERLANDS

10 **THE GOOD + THE BAD:** Pandora, a planet at the fringes of the galaxy, is in the throes of what's basically an intergalactic gold rush. You pick one of three characters—sniper, tough guy, or tech-head—and seek your fortune both online and off. Really, the game is a pop-cultural stew of what nerds love—*Mad Max, Diablo II, Unreal Tournament*—balled into a co-op multiplayer shooter where you're questing for loot and then returning to town to upgrade your gear.

We're dying to see how multiplayer pans out; Gearbox Software CEO Randy Pitchford promises players can hop into and out of games effortlessly. But will people be able to wrap their heads around a game that's a cooperative shooter *and* an RPG of sorts? The mass market seems to get confused when you start mixing genres too much.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: According to *Borderlands* producer Simon Hurley, several of the playable vehicles are customizable. Take one to the garage and you can upgrade all sorts of stuff—different types of armor plating, rail-mounted weapons, or a new paint job. Also, don't think that the dude riding shotgun has all the gun fun. Every vehicle holds at least two players—and the driver always has his own weapon to shoot.

THE PC FACTOR: While *Borderlands* is a multiplatform product through and through (and an online one, no less), we're not all that concerned. After all, Gearbox releases its *Brothers in Arms* games across the board, and those don't suffer from chronic consolitis.
•Darren Gladstone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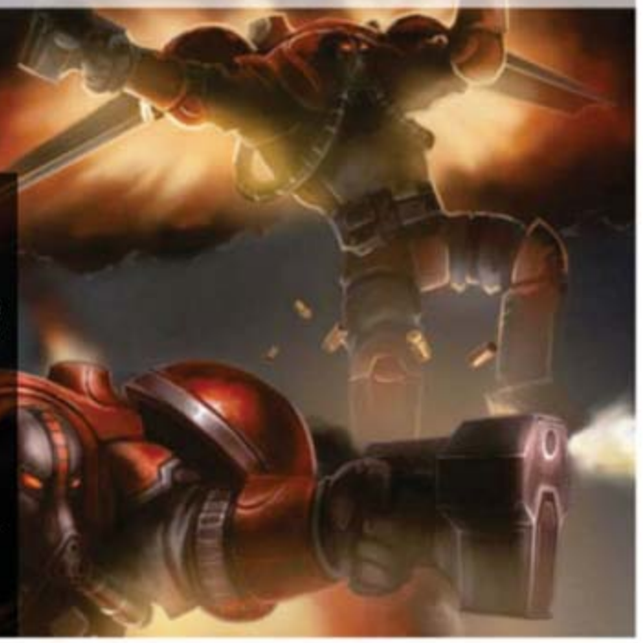
PUBLISHER: **Blizzard** DEVELOPER: **Blizzard** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy**

STARCRAFT 2



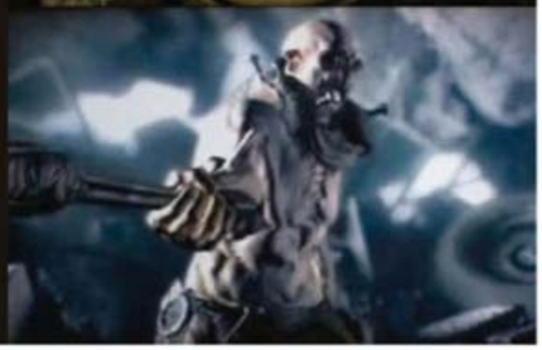
10 THE GOOD + THE BAD: When you're talking about the sequel to the greatest real-time strategy game ever—and one of the best games of all time, period—there's not much "bad" to say. Other than it's taken forever for Blizzard to get around to finally making it, and lord only knows when they'll actually finish it. Call it wishful thinking that we're putting it on this list, and be excited that everything they've shown so far looks awesome. Smartly resisting the temptation to pointlessly throw a new race or 10 into the mix, Blizzard is working instead on creating seriously cool and smart upgrades to the holy triumvirate of Protoss, Zerg, and Terran armies. An all-new 3D engine and surprisingly (for Blizzard) nonlinear single-player campaign structure only add to our pathetic, childlike need for this game to come out *now*.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: Though Blizzard once stated the popular Terran Firebat unit was cut from the sequel, PR representative Bob Colayco says: "We are testing Firebats in the current build—but no verdict on whether or not they'll stay."

THE PC FACTOR: It's Blizzard, so it's PC only. Yay! • **Jeff Green**

PUBLISHER: **TBA** DEVELOPER: **id Software** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter/Action**

RAGE



10 THE GOOD + THE BAD: For ages now, id has been synonymous with bleeding-edge (and just plain bloody) graphics in dank, dark tunnels—almost as if they feared the great outdoors. The postapocalyptic *Rage* (a little bit *Road Warrior*, a little bit racing game, a little bit FPS) looks like a departure from the Strogg-, demon-, and Nazi-filled corridors that are id's bread and butter.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: John Carmack loves Domino's pepperoni pizzas. Oh, about the game? There's actually *a whole lot* we're still in the dark about, since id maintains a full media blackout.

THE PC FACTOR: Probably the most ominous turn in this list for the PC faithful, this once PC-only developer has gone whole hog with the multiplatform thing. id Tech 5, the engine upon which *Rage* is built, is flexible enough to use the same texture data and work across multiple platforms. Exhibit A: a demo of the engine running on a PC, Mac, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3. Interestingly, Carmack has adamantly stated that the new engine does *not* support DX10. • **Darren Gladstone**

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **BioWare** GENRE: **Role-Playing Game**

DRAGON AGE

10 THE GOOD + THE BAD: Touted as a *Baldur's Gate* heir, BioWare's fantasy-RPG *Dragon Age* thrusts players into a dark, war-torn world and features a combat system that—if claims become truth—will bring visceral tactical combat that transcends tepid hack-n-slash (think the Moria cave troll battle from the film version of *Fellowship of the Ring*). We haven't heard a peep about *Dragon Age* since our cover story (*GFW* #1)...but in BioWare's case, that's not necessarily a bad omen.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: Well, here's something we didn't *expect*: In October, EA announced a pending acquisition of BioWare's parent company for a mere $800 million dollars.

THE PC FACTOR: In our aforementioned *Dragon Age* cover story, then-project director Scott Greig told us that one of their goals was to "...make sure fans knew we were working on PC games, too," in light of BioWare's console jaunts: *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, and *Mass Effect*. We can only hope that EA won't try shoehorning *DA* to consoles as well. • **Ryan Scott**

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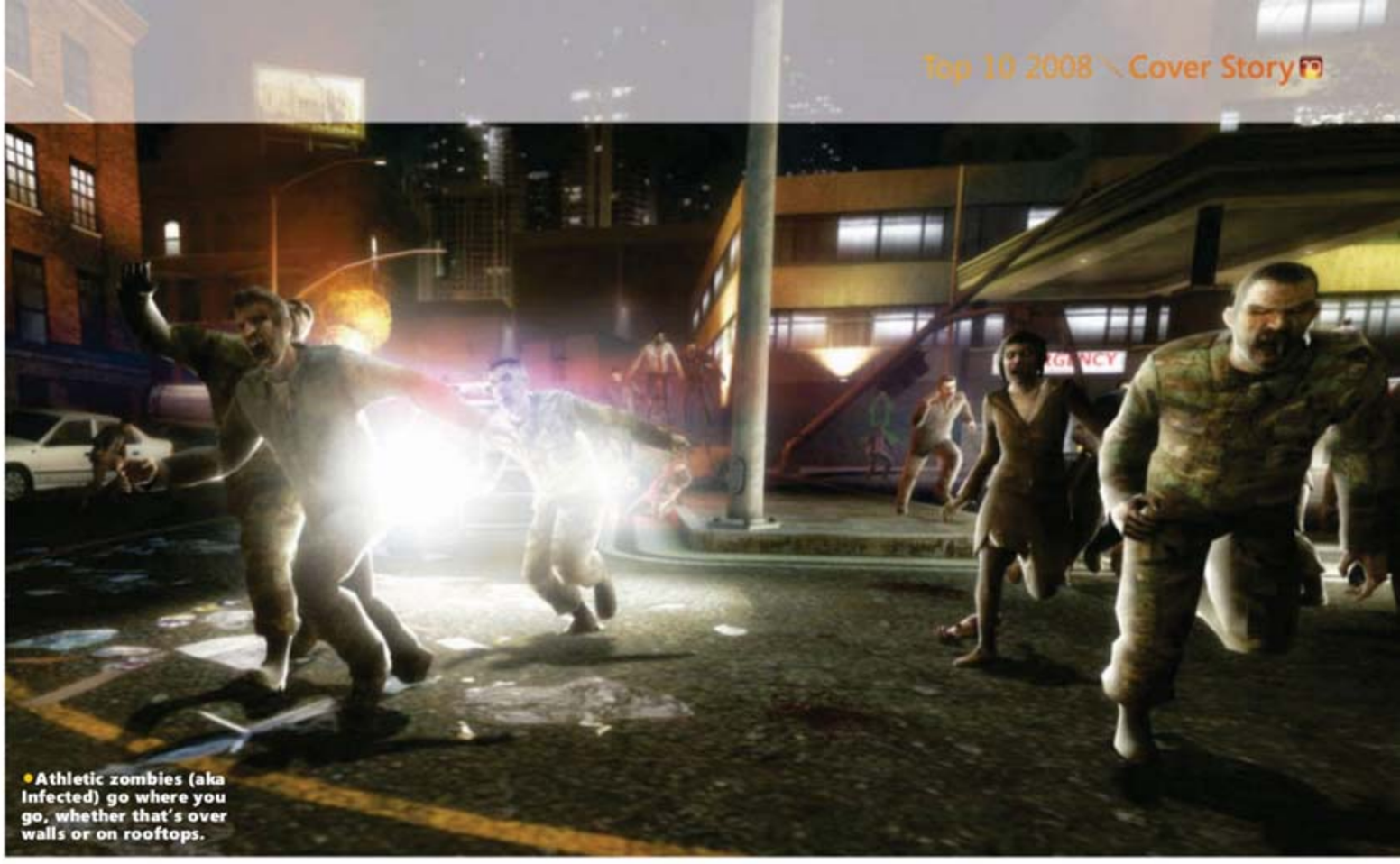
PUBLISHER: **Valve** DEVELOPER: **Turtle Rock/Valve** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter**

LEFT 4 DEAD

10 THE GOOD + THE BAD: *Left 4 Dead* is puzzling, no doubt about it. The Survivors-vs.-Infected (read: living-vs.-undead) part explains itself. Quartets of players logging online to collaboratively shoot through campaigns isn't the stumper either. Seeing zombies and *assuming* we're a bite away from becoming one ourselves is where the confusion occurs, because in addition to the Survivors, four opponents can play as special creature classes called Boss Infected. The infection isn't communicable; you are what you are. And if you're a Hunter, Smoker, Boomer, or Tank (details below), you prowl alongside CPU-controlled ghouls from start to finish. Whether or not Boss Infected suit every taste, one session on the Survivor side is enough to recognize that developers Turtle Rock and Valve are delivering on a bright idea, however hard it is to wrap your head around.

SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW: When America turns zombie, we'll stroll, not sprint (see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's startling obesity statistics). The Boomer is where Big Dawg oversize Tees and megasize Hardee's meals go to die; he'd chase you in a power chair if he could. On screen, his pot belly bobs over unloosed dungarees, "showing off our procedural physics," *Left 4 Dead* lead and Turtle Rock founder Mike Booth comments. However the voice actor casting call read, Mike Patton, who once topped charts as alt-rock outfit *Faith No More*'s frontman, answered. "He taped page after page of 'growl angry' or 'growl surprised,'" project manager/writer Chet Faliszek says. "At one point, he had to hold a bucket, fill his mouth with water, gargle, and puke. Patton's absolutely amazing. Before we ask him to vomit, he's already belching." Because the Boomer's bouncing gut is, you know, a vat of bile.

According to Faliszek, "The theory is [that] he's full of methane. Spark the gas and he goes boom. We establish these rules, such as 'shoot anything that moves,' and then turn them on their head with Boss Infected. So with the Boomer, it's suddenly, 'Wait, dude. *Do not* shoot that one when he's on top of other survivors!' We continue to experiment with and evolve the Infected, and it's working well. None of the Infected are hurt when falling, and that became an issue with the Boomer because he'd get on high rooftops



Athletic zombies (aka Infected) go where you go, whether that's over walls or on rooftops.

and throw himself in front of you while you're firing. It was cheesy. Now when he hits bottom, he blows up like a big, bloody water balloon." And, yes, the splatter—same as vomit—still baits vanilla zombies, 15, 20 at a time. In other words, the impact isn't immediately lethal anymore, but you're s*** for the flies all the same.

The Tank, a brickhouse form of Boss Infected, needed tweaking, too. Instead of jumping, its opponents juked and backpedaled. To redress the problem, Turtle Rock added the ability to uproot, tear apart, and catapult trees and asphalt alike. "You throw them in arcs," says Booth, "launch a chunk of concrete halfway across the map and through a little window or whatever."

"You hear it sailing," chimes Faliszek, "shhhhhhhhhhBOOM!"

"He's supposed to be this big boss, right? He should come out and cause terror," Booth says. "So, as a designer, I love it when the Tank singles someone out, swats him over, and then smacks the hell out of him as the other Survivors try to help. That's another thing we added—the Tank can pound on people he incapacitates. Four hits, and you're dead. You're gone. Now if all four survivors focus their fire on him, he's stoppable. But Survivor-side players have to know that their teammates won't panic. If one of you freaks out, you're all f***ed. And the Tank is like, 'Yes! I did my duty!' even if he's not the one to ultimately stop the Survivors—even though he died."

This idea—doing a duty—is uniquely *Left 4 Dead*'s. On the dry-erase board, bastard undead who puke, skulk, wallop, and literally tongue lash their way to victory look like the better pick. All this, or dudes with guns (and we've been there and done that). Only it turns out that the dudes with guns make immediate sense; and "shoot it if it moves," the Survivors' rule of thumb, takes on the markings of the most appealing cooperative FPS I've played, what when our would-be killers can ambush us from anywhere, and, yes, blow chunks to the tune of Mike Patton. Infected, on the other hand? They take guile and finesse. Where death indicates failure for Survivors, it's Infected stock and trade. The difference is very much the frame of mind associated with videogame campaigning versus that of online deathmatching, and it's odd to have the one when your opponent has the other. Isn't it a little like tag or hide-and-seek, I ask, in that >

• The Campaign map called Cornfield starts in the woods and concludes on a farm.

• Infected emerge from the forest—exploring Cornfield's fringes is perilous.

the person playing "it" almost always would rather reverse roles?

"The fundamental problem with the Infected," answers Booth, "is that it's similar to what happens with *Counter-Strike*. When you're brand new to *Counter-Strike*...*it is rough*. It's not a learning curve—it's a learning cliff. You spawn; you die; you wait and watch for five minutes. With the Infected—well, say you're a Hunter. You're like, 'Let's get 'em! You run out, yell raaargh, they shoot, and you die. Next, you realize you need to skulk around a bit before you pounce. We want to make that curve easier to climb. There's no way around it, though; the Infected side is advanced. You'll want to start as a Survivor and get a feel for how the game and Boss Infected work before you try them."

Crucial as it is to Survivor survival, coordination can also turn the Infected game from one of harassment to bona fide blood bath. Booth illustrates: "Say a Smoker hangs a guy. [Note that Smokers' prehensile tongues serve as nooses. The neck tie comes off when other Survivors intervene.] He calls a Boomer over, and he vomits on the victim. Or he sticks around and pukes on a second Survivor who tries to free the first one. All hell just breaks loose."

Left 4 Dead is one unruly flare-up after another. "Hell breaks loose" is as good a label for the game itself as it is for the fruit of tag-team Infected tactics. Turtle Rock's procedural system spawns CPU-controlled brain-feeders on the fly, which means memorizing a sequence of scripted events is no way to win. As Booth points out, unpredictability factors into its replayable nature: "At QuakeCon [where Valve demonstrated the game], guys would wait in line again and again to play three, four, and five times. The second time they'd play, they would watch, like, 'OK, last time, there was a mob here; let's ambush them.'"

"They'd throw Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs around the corner. And this time, nothing's there," Faliszek adds and pauses. "We've been at this for years now, so the experience better be dynamic and different. Otherwise, I'd pull out my hair after every playtest."

THE PC FACTOR: It's Valve, so PC is *Left 4 Dead*'s lead platform, and Steam remains the surest source of steady content updates. "We're already planning additional campaigns and Boss Infected, and we're playing with new weapons," Booth says. "Eventually, I want to have enough Infected types to ensure that Survivors never know what they'll run into." • **Shawn Elliott**

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THE TARDY SHEET

Three names to put on the board

In last year's Top Ten 2007 (*GFW* #1), we expressed anticipation for *Crysis*, *BioShock*, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, and a handful of other games. Most of 'em turned out well (see sidebar), but *Spore*, *Alan Wake*, and *Pirates of the Burning Sea* all wound up slipping into next year. What's up with these games? Read on as we catch up with each. •Ryan Scott

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts**
DEVELOPER: **Maxis**
GENRE: **Strategy/Simulation**

SPORE

EA's quietly moved Will Wright's next big money printer—er, game—into 2008. According to executive producer Lucy Bradshaw, the team's spent the past year "taking time to make sure [*Spore*] lives up to Will's vision and everyone's high expectations," devoting significant time and resources to shared player-created content and the later stages of gameplay. With luck, we'll spend next summer evolving freakish, cuddly li'l monstrosities into highly advanced, spacefaring, havoc-wreaking civilizations.

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft**
DEVELOPER: **Remedy Entertainment**
GENRE: **Action-Adventure**

ALAN WAKE

What's up with psychological thriller *Alan Wake*? Those who read *CGW*'s swan-song cover story in issue #268 (just before our *GFW* relaunch) know as much as we do. The plot follows insomniac horror novelist Alan Wake and an ensemble supporting cast across several arc-driven narratives (the pacing uses seasonal television as a model), where real life starts to mirror the events of Wake's upcoming book just a *little* too closely. Beyond that, Microsoft ain't talking—except to assure us that the game's still under development at *Max Payne* maker Remedy Entertainment.

PUBLISHER: **Sony Online Entertainment**
DEVELOPER: **Flying Lab Software**
GENRE: **MMORPG**

PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

Big things happened for Flying Lab Software's corsair MMO during 2007—notably, a publishing partnership with success-starved SOE. *Pirates of the Burning Sea*'s rapidly approaching its January 22, 2008 launch, with spooky *Pirates of the Caribbean*–ish supernatural content (read: G-G-G-GHOST PIRATES!) woven into the already-complex web of swashbuckling, privateering, and PVP-controlled political dominance. Given the bevy of top-tier tabletop RPG talent at work here (contemporary *Call of Cthulhu* mainstay John Tynes, and *Freeport* designers Chris Pramas and Jess Lebow), we're confident that this game's got sea legs.

XTRAS

Look for screens, videos, and more information on the games in our Top 10 2008 list at GFW13.1UP.com.

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2007 REPORT CARD

Did we make the right calls with our Top Ten 2007? Here's how the big guns fared.

BIOSHOCK

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **2K Boston**
SCORE: 10 out of 10 (*GFW* #11)
Last year, *BioShock* creative director Ken Levine told us that "*BioShock* will redefine what people expect from a first-person shooter." He was absolutely right.

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EALA**
SCORE: 9 out of 10 (*GFW* #6)
Regardless of how you feel about the FMV "acting," *C&C3* returns the military RTS franchise to a level of prestige not seen since *C&C: Red Alert*, thanks in large part to a dramatically improved version of the *Battle for Middle-earth II* game engine.

CRYSIS

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Crytek**
SCORE: TBD
CryENGINE's technical prowess heads the class of 2007, and nothing in 2008 is positioned to top it. More importantly, *Crysis*' engineering excellence enables level design as forward-thinking as it is freeform.

ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Splash Damage**
SCORE: 9 out of 10 (*GFW* #13)
Quake Wars is what happens when clever modmakers go pro: a sophisticated infantry- and vehicle-based team FPS that lives up to both the *Enemy Territory* and *Quake* names. Peep our review on pg. 66.

HALF-LIFE 2: THE ORANGE BOX

PUBLISHER: **Valve/EA** DEVELOPER: **Valve**
SCORE: 10 out of 10 (*GFW* #12)
The holy trinity of *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, *Portal*, and *Team Fortress 2* lit the PC world on fire. How do you top this? Well, *Episode Three* and *Left 4 Dead* are good starts.

HELLGATE: LONDON

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Flagship Studios**
SCORE: TBD
We're already getting those "just one more mission" flashbacks from the *Diablo II* days. It's just too soon to tell if that'll last.

SUPREME COMMANDER

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Gas Powered Games**
SCORE: 7 out of 10 (*GFW* #5)
Maverick designer Chris Taylor's *Total Annihilation* successor wasn't quite the tour de force many hoped for, but the ideas behind it are still pretty epic—even if it doesn't have *quite* the polish of *Company of Heroes* or *Command & Conquer 3*.

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BEYOND THE BOX

Valve cofounder Gabe Newell on the company's future

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

INTERVIEW

WARNING!
The following conversation contains big *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* spoilers.

GFW: What is the current state of what you've dubbed Valve's "episodic experiment"?

GABE NEWELL: Our customers now have two contrasting examples with *Episode One* and *The Orange Box*. We'll give them one more data point with *Episode Three*. Then they can say, "We liked *Episode One*," or "We liked *Episode Two* or *Three* more." It'll give us a full framework to analyze.

GFW: If *Orange Box* is supersuccessful, is the message that we want episodes or that we want big boxes with a whole bunch of good games?

GN: Well, it's still interesting data, right? We want to give people enough perspective so that they're able to say, "Make more boxes, but don't do that *Episode Three* thing again." Or, "Screw everything. What we want is more *Portal*!" [*Laughs*] At this point, I've had about 1,000 e-mails from people who've purchased *Orange Box*. With *Episode One*, we ended up with some 7,000. We read through them all; everybody on the development team does.

We get wacky requests. Somebody just asked for a picture of me holding up a sign saying "Daniel Mortensen is my son." So I sent him a picture. Sometimes people in other entertainment industries send us mail. For a while, I exchanged mail with [*Lost* executive producer] J.J. Abrams—got to get his perspective on some other things we're doing. That's pretty fun, just to have people from outside the game industry talk about what they see as our strengths and weaknesses.

GFW: In his book *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steve Johnson argues that *Lost*'s structure is based on the way some videogames work. In turn, your episodes are inspired by serial shows such as *Lost*: They pose two questions for every question they answer.

GN: Absolutely. You manage the tension between resolution of some themes and arcs versus continuing to propel people into the future with what will happen next. We share similar issues there, and it's interesting to see the different choices that are being made between *Heroes* and *Lost*, where *Heroes* is so much more willing to resolve things and have faith that it'll be able to maintain peoples' interest. There's not some central mystery that has to be kept hidden for seven seasons, like on *The X-Files*. And then when you find it out, it's like, so what?

GFW: Did J.J. ask you about the G-Man in that capacity?

GN: No. We didn't talk much about the G-Man.

GFW: Granted, there's a lot more to *Half-Life*'s story than who and what the G-Man is, but it seems that the longer those questions go unanswered, the less likely you'll be able to answer them to everyone's satisfaction.

GN: We have some good answers. I totally recognize, though, that you can't become excessively cautious and fearful that the reason people are interested in what's happening is the mystery. Because that just means you're avoiding the ongoing problem of telling new stories and creating new characters. I think people are worried, like, what happens if we kill off characters? I was just responding to an e-mail from a fan who had this idea that somehow we could bring Eli Vance back, and I was like, "No, he's dead!" He really is dead. People die in this universe; it's not a kids' TV show where the cast of characters is static, and what can happen to them is constrained by the fact that customers are able to view the TV shows out of order, right? Which is a horrible constraint to put on TV writers. That's something we've never had to deal with.

GFW: How far in advance did you decide Eli's fate?

GN: A pretty long time. There's a difference between plot points and character arcs and other decisions that we make about set-pieces and weapons, which tend to be plastic, as opposed to story stuff, which we need to work out in order to build toward conclusions and a sense of closure. It's a lot easier to produce smaller stories like *Portal*.

GFW: Are you interested in producing more stories of *Portal*'s sort?

GN: The interesting thing about *Portal* is that we know who the protagonist, Chell, is, and we'd already planned that character's part in something that occurs later. With *Portal*, we sort of opportunistically said, "Oh, she fits in here. This makes sense."

GFW: So she's not Alyx's mom?

GN: No, she's not, although that's a good guess. It hadn't occurred to me that she could be Alyx's mom! But we know that the character's going to be there going forward.

GFW: How different is the market Valve sees itself preparing for three to five years from now?

GN: A couple of technology changes are on the horizon, and I think a big market change is about to occur. On the technology side, we're going to move away from the current heterogeneous computing environment and move to homogeneous computing, where you have a single memory address space and a single set of instructions for your A.I. and rendering. The good news is that I suspect we'll see a significant improvement in scalability, and the pace at which game technology moves forward will increase as a result of that transition.

Right now, we have the CPU, API [application programming interface], and GPU [graphics processing unit], and then people are trying to argue that there should be a PPU [physics processing unit], an A.I. accelerator, and these other kinds of things. We think it's going to go the other way, whether it's somebody who figures out how to generalize GPU cores or somebody who makes multicore CPUs that also handle rendering. The heterogeneous environment's going to go away. Scalability will stop being a hardware problem and will become a software problem—how well can we take advantage of all these cores? It's good news, as it means the same performance gains that we've seen in graphics since 3DFX will now apply to every aspect of game engines as well. And I think you'll see a proliferation of very different approaches to building game engines. Right now, the structure of game engines are all pretty similar; you'll see some wildly different approaches once we move into this homogeneous environment. We'll continue to get better and better pictures, but we'll also see more and more interesting games.

GFW: [*Half-Life* series writer] Marc Laidlaw writes sci-fi novels, only none of them are *Half-Life*–related. It seems you're not so interested in selling the story outside of your games.

GN: We've talked plenty with people about a *Half-Life* movie, and the one thing we never understand is where this would be better than some random piece of summer special-effects trash. That sounds great to a lot of people in Hollywood—"Hey, you've got a preexisting audience; we can drive them into the first weekend and make our development and marketing costs back! Woo!" There, the one and only good reason to make a bad movie is vanity. These things are vanity pieces. So the question we ask ourselves is: Why is this somehow worth doing? There's no *Half-Life* movie because we could never figure that out. Same with books. Marc would be perfectly happy to write a bunch of books, but we're still scratching our heads. We can make games. We understand why our games are going to be worth people's time and money, and why they're going to be better games than most of what's out there, but we need to go through that same process to understand how we can make a comic book that's better than a marketing tie-in. You start to see some of these efforts with the *Team Fortress 2* movie shorts. They actually help us make better games, in addition to being a good way of communicating things about the games. We improve our character designs in the process of creating these shorts; we develop content that we can put back into our games, and we're really happy that it's a leveraged investment. That's what we want to make, not more shovelware.

GFW: A year ago, you argued that you'll evolve Source indefinitely. Has your attitude changed at all? Will Valve ever build another engine?

GN: What we've seen confirms our thinking quite a bit, that shipping incremental improvements to an engine is a far better strategy than throwing everything away and starting over from scratch with each new game. The engineering answer is clear: We're improving A.I., rendering, physics, and authoring a lot faster than when we were first developing Source. And it runs fast, right? Much of the mail I get is like, "I can't believe how good this looks and how fast it runs. I downloaded blah-blah-blah beta and it runs at a quarter of Source's framerate, and Source still looks better. I thought these were supposed to be fabulous, all-singing, all-dancing engines. They're just slow and not that good-looking." I think that's a consequence of building on a polished engine and picking your problems carefully, so that you're not spending 90 percent of your budget just to get your first pixel up on the screen again. Instead, you're spending your time making the thing better.

In theory, I suppose we could encounter a problem where we have to start over from scratch. For example, there isn't a specific problem today that we look at and say, "Oh, my god—we need to rethink everything. The most likely case where that would occur is with this transition from heterogeneous to homogeneous computing, since Source was designed to work in an environment where you have a CPU and a GPU. Other than that, there aren't many things that we look at that lead us to say, "Let's start over."

AFTERTHOUGHTS
PORTAL

INTERVIEW

GFW: Do you find *Portal*'s popularity surprising? Online communities are producing cutout Companion Cubes, turret-themed ringtones....
KIM SWIFT, LEVEL DESIGNER: We will sell Companion Cube plushies. We wanted to ship them sooner, but getting the look we wanted took a little time.

GFW: You were that confident the Companion Cube gag would go over well?
KS: We knew they'd like it, but not *how much* they'd like it.
JEEP BARNETT, PROGRAMMER: Dude, we didn't know they'd become obsessive.
KS: Someone at rockpapershotgun.com painted his freezer to look like a Companion Cube.

GFW: Why is this particular aspect resonating with people?
JB: You're alone through the entire game, and the Cube is your one and only companion. I'm not sure.

GFW: And yet nobody made paper Alyx dolls.
KS: It's the irony—this inanimate object, and then, of course, you have to incinerate it at the end, and that's ironic in light of the ending. And people like to laugh.

GFW: Was the incineration idea inspired in part by the infamous Milgram experiment?
KS: Not particularly. We had a long level called Box Marathon; we wanted players to bring this box with them from the beginning to the end. But people would forget about the box, so we added dialogue, applied the heart to the cube, and continued to up the ante until people became attached to the box. Later on, we added the incineration idea. The artistic expression grew from the gameplay.

GFW: Are you able to track how long we hesitate between when we're given the order to incinerate the box and when we actually do?
KS: I don't think we've tracked that.
JB: That would have been good data to collect.
KS: That would be pretty fun.

GFW: Perhaps players are stopping and working out a way to save the thing?
KS: A couple of people jumped into the incinerator themselves rather than kill the Cube.
JB: One person said that it was harder for them to incinerate the Companion Cube than it was to kill a Little Sister. Oh, god—what have we done?

GFW: People anthropomorphize anything. How similar is the *Portal* you shipped to the one plotted out in the design document?
KS: The ending evolved a ton. We iterated so many times.
JB: At one point we had three sections: the test chambers, behind-the-scenes areas, and a sort of office space. We didn't have time to develop the office space, so we left it out.
KS: At one point, the big room with all the turrets and pillboxes was where you first met GLaDOS. She moved around from chamber to chamber. We dropped that idea pretty quickly. We found that it wasn't very fair because you wanted to focus on GLaDOS, but the turrets shot you from behind.

GFW: Was *Portal*'s arch humor always in the works?
JB: Since we met up with [writers] Chet [Faliszek] and Erik [Wolpaw], yeah.
KS: Maybe a couple of months into development, we decided that *Portal* was too dry, that we needed story or something. After talking to Erik, we came up with the idea of the disembodied voice talking to you. With only a handful of people on the project, creating a whole new character with animations and the like would've been a lot of work. What's the path of least resistance? Disembodied voice!

GFW: And your environment already looked a little like *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s—putting in a HAL-9000 figure....
KS: Surprisingly enough, that movie wasn't much of an influence. Erik hasn't seen *2001*.

To some, *Portal* heroine Chell's physical appearance suggested a connection to *Half-Life 2's* Alyx Vance.

SCAVENGER HUNT

***Portal* Easter eggs include:**

- Keyboards' A, S, D, E, R, H, N, I, and P keys—letters need to spell Adrian Shepherd, *Half-Life* Expansion *Opposing Force's* protagonist—are highlighted in yellow (see above).
- Removing observation cameras from test chambers provokes GLaDOS.
- Website ApertureScience.com, accessible using login information that appears in *Portal*, provides additional plot details.

"WE DECIDED THAT *PORTAL* WAS TOO DRY. THAT IT NEEDED A STORY OR SOMETHING." –KIM SWIFT, LEVEL DESIGNER

GFW: I don't believe it. Even right down to the song....
JB: "Daisy, Daisy." It's been a really, really long time.

GFW: The austere setting...I'm not pulling this out of my ass, you know.
KS: We were working with complex environments way back when, but that was the wrong idea for *Portal*. Because we're introducing a new concept, it was best to keep it bare bones. In one section, all you were supposed to do was put a box on a button and open a door. One player literally spent 30 minutes trying to push a shelf onto the button, meanwhile, the box was sitting right there. That's how the clinical test-chamber environment came to be.
JB: One reference we used was *The Island*, which was this movie about clones in a sterile environment. One breaks free, like in *Logan's Run*.

GFW: Did you set out to develop a short game?
KS: Well, we knew what we wanted to cover. If we added much more, the pacing wouldn't work as well. We wanted people to have a good time from beginning to end.

GFW: You're going up against very deep-seated assumptions about what constitutes a proper game.
KS: But who came up with those? That's what I'm confused about.

GFW: Look at comic books. How long did it take to develop the graphic novel? Or for three-minute pop songs to make way for stretched-out prog songs? Granted, you're going the other way.
JB: Being able to see a game's beginning and ending in a single sitting adds extra perspective to the experience. As opposed to something like *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, where every other week I pick it up and wonder what I'm doing in this electric plant or wherever.

GFW: Were you planning on *Portal* being as funny as it is?
KS: Oh, hell yes. [*Laughs*] Erik Wolpaw is probably one of the funniest men on the planet. I felt it was my personal duty to enable Erik to be as funny as possible.
JB: We'd say we wanted a boss battle...asked if he could have her say funny things as she's hurt. The next day, he sends us this script, and we're laughing out loud.

GFW: Whose idea was the song?
KS: [*Laughs*] We've been Jonathan Coulton fans for a while. We talked to him at a show. After talking to Erik, he apparently had this master plan, a major ambition to work on a game with a musical ending.

GFW: Would you have liked to include more music in the game? Some switch on the wall you flip when you want GLaDOS to sing?
JB: [*Laughs*] Test chamber themes!

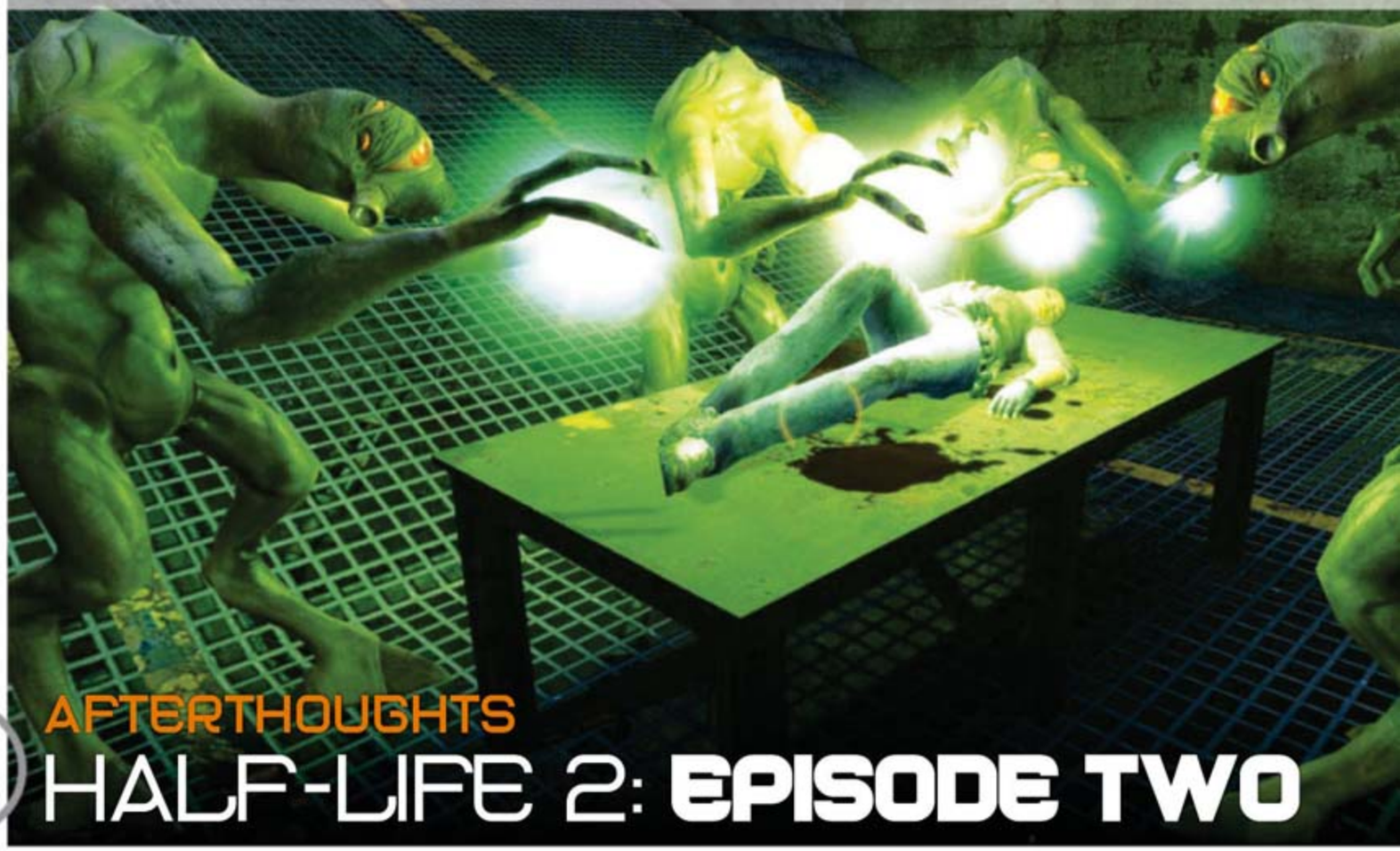
GFW: You've seen the speed runs on YouTube, I'm sure.
JB: They're amazing. "Eight Portals in 18" blows me away. He gets a bucket and a radio, knocks down one of turrets with the radio, grabs it, and runs, [and] then he takes and puts the bucket on the turret, stands on that, and uses it as a platform....
KS: Because he needs just a little bit more height to be able to make the jump. We stared with our mouths open, like, "Oh, god—you have got to be kidding."
JB: I e-mailed immediately: "The ninja has been dethroned." [*Laughter*]
KS: Jeep was our resident *Portal* ninja.
JB: Ninja emeritus now. I'm retired.

GFW: The Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device (ASHPD) looks like a pun on Adrian Shepherd [*Half-Life* expansion *Opposing Force's* protagonist].
KS: That was a complete coincidence. We think it's funny.

GFW: What are the odds, though? And then the keyboards' A, S, D, E, R, H, N, I, and P keys are highlighted in the Aperture observation rooms.
KS: We added those after people pointed out the ASHPD stuff.

GFW: So you're feeding the significance junkies, then?
KS: [*Laughing*] Yeah. It's a red herring, a tribute to the hardcore.

GFW: I'm hardcore. How do you explain the Combine energy orbs in Aperture's labs?
JB: Here's my explanation: Within the *Half-Life* universe, pure forms of energy just happen to form into balls.
KS: Perhaps the Combine stole it from Aperture. You never know.



AFTERTHOUGHTS

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO

INTERVIEW

GFW: Was it always part of the plan to load *Episode Two* with little items for significance junkies, like the *Lost* hatch icon, the infamous numbers on a computer monitor, the skeletal couple on a couch who clearly come from *BioShock*...?

DAVID SPEYRER, *EPISODE TWO* LEAD: [*Lost* cocreator] J.J. Abrams corresponds with [Valve cofounder] Gabe [Newell] from time to time. They mutually admire one another's work. Once we found out about that—and that *Half-Life* appeared in an episode of *Lost*—we knew we needed to find a good opportunity for a *Lost* reference.

GFW: Any somewhat significant Easter eggs you can point out?

DS: Well, we planned the gnome as a long-term achievement. You collect it and carry it all the way to the rocket. The genesis of the idea was just, "Hey, let's put this garden gnome into the game. People can take it around and pose it for screenshots in front of landmarks." But when we began building achievements...in *Half-Life 2* there's a milk crate and a baby doll, and fans figured out that you could carry the baby in the crate through the game. So we said, "Let's create this cool thing that you'll want to take from A to Z and add a reward to it."

GFW: Is it weird to have achievements in *Half-Life*? You take great pains to eliminate artifice in the game, to deemphasize your user interface, and to communicate information through context.

DS: On consoles, I think it fits well. On PC, I see the argument for turning achievements off if you think the pop-ups are intrusive.

GFW: We're going through the Antlion larder crushing grubs, when you also want us to worry about Alyx's survival.

DS: Yeah, you're just not gonna want to worry about those grinds the first time through.

GAUTAM BABBAR, *EPISODE TWO* ART LEAD: That achievement actually came out of playtests where we'd watch people, and they wanted to save Alex, but were also compelled to stomp every single grub they saw.

GFW: With some tinkering in the developer's command console, we're able to fire the Hunter's explosive flechettes. Was the plan for players to rip part of the Hunter out and appropriate it in *Half-Life* fashion?

DS: I actually put that in to test the damage they do. Sure, it immediately suggested a weapon, but because of the ripple effect it would have had throughout the game, at that point it was too prohibitive to explore.

GFW: *Lost* has its own G-Men in Alvar Hanso and Jacob. *Twin Peaks* attempted to tie a ribbon around its mystery—who killed Laura Palmer?—and wasn't able to satisfy a couple seasons' worth of speculation. Are you confident you can resolve *Half-Life*'s principal enigmas, especially the G-Man?

DS: The key is to answer a set of questions while asking new ones at the same time. It's not clear how concrete we want to be in the way that we address who the G-Man is and what's he all about. We're going to say things about his motivations and his origins, but *how* we answer these questions is all-important. To tell it straightforward—that he's X, and his motivation is Y—is flat and ultimately unsatisfying. But I think the answers are going to be really, really gratifying.

GFW: *Episode Two* ends on a sweet note insofar as anything can happen, although with the one assumption that *Portal*'s Aperture project.... You know, I forgot to ask Kim and Jeep about *Portal*'s protagonist being Alyx's mother.

DS: They wouldn't have answered that one. No way. [*Laughter*]

GFW: But them beating around the bush is interesting. You're two episodes into what you've called the "episodic experiment"—are you getting good results?

•Ovipositor alert: Insects inspired Valve's Strider design.

•Achievement points turn grub smashing into a minigame.

SCAVENGER HUNT

***Episode Two* Easter eggs include:**

- A Dharma Initiative emblem adapted from the ABC TV series *Lost*
- A visible but inaccessible computer monitor bearing the same show's infamous magic "numbers"
- The skeletal remains of a couple on a couch (see below)—an homage to parents who commit suicide upon losing their daughter to *BioShock*'s Little Sister program.
- A garden gnome (see interview)

DS: I'm very happy with the games that Valve is making. I think that a lot of the stuff I've seen in the press and on forums focuses on the word "episode" and its implications for length and frequency of delivery. The biggest criticism has been about the latter, and we need to figure that out.

The somewhat smaller scope of the product allowed us maximize quality. That goes for storytelling, too; we made major revisions, changed the story at the end, and then we were able to fold that change all the way back through to the beginning, basically saying, "Well, we can build up to this conclusion here, here, and here." With something the size of *Half-Life 2*, that's a lot harder to do.

GFW: Did you begin building *Episode Three* before finishing *Episode Two*?

DS: Yeah. There was a period where the *Episode One* team leapfrogged ahead on *Episode Three* preproduction. Later, we looked at the scope of *Episode Two* and decided it was more valuable to take what was the *Episode Three* team and move them on to all three games in *The Orange Box*. That was absolutely the right decision. So we laid some groundwork for *Episode Three* but aren't necessarily locking ourselves into that. We want to give ourselves room to experiment, see how it pans out.

GB: ...to go over the feedback that we're getting, in the way that *Episode Two* incorporated feedback from *Episode One*. As far as actual gameplay goes, we haven't gotten lots of negative feedback—no spots where people stop playing, unlike *Episode One*'s elevator scene.

GFW: That scene is an interesting story insofar as you made it easier. Positive perceptions about A.I. almost always involves A.I. that lives long enough to demonstrate its abilities. Enemies in *Halo*'s celebrated Legendary difficulty level, for example, are cited as among the most intelligent in the genre—however, they also have more hit points. Have you thought much about introducing an ultrahard mode to *Half-Life*?

GB: We've talked about it. We would want to really invest in game rules for that, and we haven't had time. That's one of *Halo*'s successes—they make it interesting. We might try it in the future. I'm not sure.

DS: I'm interested in seeing what size of the audience the feature appeals to. Are we talking about a tiny cluster or a significant chunk of our players? We definitely understand that there's a strong correlation between dying and quitting. Maybe *Episode One*'s elevator scene involved qualitative factors—say, people were dying because they didn't know what they needed to do in order to succeed, and that's why they stopped playing. It's complicated....

That said, we all agree that there's a lot of value in A.I.s that live long enough to demonstrate interesting behaviors. The Hunter is an experiment in that area. When you fight multiple Hunters at once, you have to change tactics—empty one weapon, throw objects with the Gravity Gun, jump in the car. That seemed like a step in the right direction for our combat and our combat A.I. Still, we want to take A.I. in interesting directions—directions that are different from a single, supertough intelligence.

GFW: That's a teaser. What can you tell me?

DS: Well, we're experimenting. [*Laughs*] It's too early to talk about, and, you know, there's no *Episode Three* teaser at the end of *Episode Two*. We want to experiment with what exactly *Episode Three* is yet. Plus, we wouldn't want to spoil the moment at the end of *Episode Two*—to jump into an action-packed teaser would be jarring.

GFW: Isn't *Orange Box* escalating expectations? If you launch the next episode by itself, we'll wonder where that year's *Portal* and *Team Fortress 2* are.

GB: I'm sure we'll try something interesting for the next release. I don't know what it'll be.

DS: We joke about that—if we have to up the ante for our next product, it's like four new games, plus the back catalog. It's kinda scary. Every time we make things scary for ourselves as content creators, though, we end up doing something cooler than we originally intended. We'll keep going like this and see where it leads us.

"IF WE HAVE TO UP THE ANTE FOR OUR NEXT PRODUCT, IT'S LIKE FOUR NEW GAMES, PLUS THE BACK CATALOG."

–DAVID SPEYRER, PROJECT LEAD

AFTERTHOUGHTS

TEAM FORTRESS 2

INTERVIEW

GFW: Are you ready to talk about *Team Fortress 2*'s two false starts at long last?

ROBIN WALKER, COCREATOR: We're not really ready to talk about those because we want to release a *Raising the Bar*–style book.

GFW: Once upon a time, *Team Fortress 2* looked like what *Battlefield* became. You later went the other way, opting for simplicity over the supercomplexity of today's top team-based shooters.

RW: What we found as we worked on *TF2* over the years and went through all these iterations is that depth doesn't demand increased complexity. *TF2* is a sucker punch—it only looks simple. We're already seeing large-scale skill differences. Right now, we know the nuances. When the Shack group, who are incredibly hardcore FPS gamers, challenged our team, we totally crushed the living crap out of them. Strategy is about balancing decisions against constraints. Your team has 12 guys, and you ask, "What are the best classes we can choose for these conditions?"

We started to see what the true core of our game was and stripped out stuff that wasn't needed. You can always point to any feature and say it's fun. The question is, what are the negatives associated with it? Grenades are the obvious example.

When we decided to try *Team Fortress* without these things, the team assumed, "Oh, god—there's no way we can get on without these!" Then we playtested, and all agreed: The game is actually better. And there's certainly a threshold you can cross over where too much complexity prevents people from appreciating the depth. Look at chess, rock-paper-scissors....

GFW: *The Sims* creator Will Wright loves *Go* [an ancient and strategically complex game with simple rules].

RW: Yeah, an insanely simple mechanic. You each take turns putting a single piece onto this table, but people spend centuries writing strategy analyses. It literally took us years to get to the point where we were able to do that as designers, to even realize it was right.

GFW: This is a radically different perspective than that of the modmakers you once were—where with modders, the idea is frequently to find as many weird and new approaches as possible. Times have changed. Can you imagine making *Team Fortress Classic* for consoles?

RW: The console thing's interesting because internally...well, we didn't even think about it. Not as much as much as we should have. The sort of streamlining and reductionist design had nothing to do with the game going out on consoles. We don't think that there's any real difference between what console and PC players find fun. The interfaces differ, though not the gamers themselves, not enough to where we should be thinking about that when we're designing. And the other thing...it's a really interesting observation to say that *TF2* is counter to the modmaker philosophy. Modmakers have a set of advantages: They can aim for a niche audience in that if you're going to make a mod for *Half-Life 2*, your audience is already defined for you.

GFW: Did you design critical hits to provide a degree of access to people who don't traditionally play shooters?

RW: A lot of people assume that they're there to help new players. Some of it's pacing. We looked at *Counter-Strike*, where you happen to get lucky at times and get five consecutive headshots. And then you talk about it for another three weeks.

GFW: Is that luck or skill?

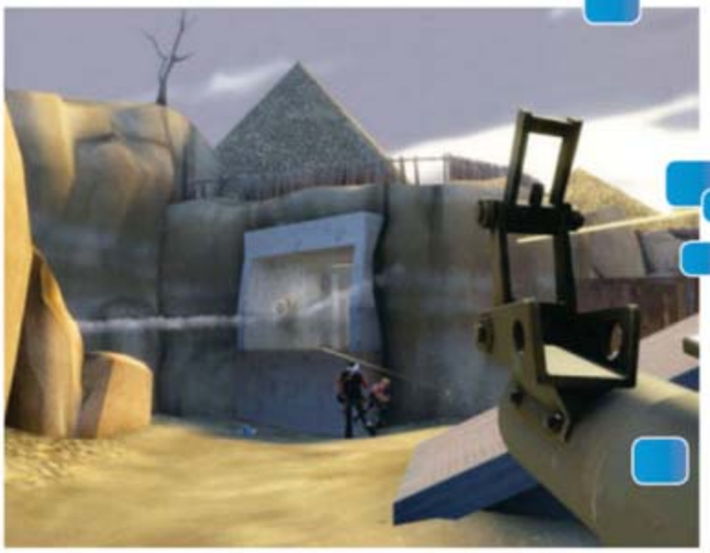
RW: It's skill affecting luck. You can't control the Gaussian distribution of fire when you pull the trigger, but skill is involved in centering that Gaussian distribution on an opponent's

XTRAS

More *Orange Box*! Find more material from all four of our Valve interviews (Gabe Newell, *Portal*, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, and *Team Fortress 2*) on GFW13.1UP.com.

1UP NETWORK

"People are saying, 'We want more maps!' And we're like, 'Yep, totally with you,'" *Team Fortress 2* cocreator Robin Walker assures. "We are making more maps."



"ONE WAY HARDCORE PLAYERS SALVAGE THEIR EGOS IS BY SAYING THAT THE OTHER GUYS GOT LUCKY."

–ROBIN WALKER, COCREATOR

head. The idea that there shouldn't be any luck in an FPS is silly.

We created *Team Fortress 2*'s critical-hit system so that critical-hit chances increase over time based on performance. There's the skill. If you're a good player, you'll always have a higher chance of hitting criticals than novices. On top of that, there's the flat-out fact that crit chance is determined when you fire, right? You can miss crits.

Adding randomness increases the range of possible tactical skill options. Sometimes, the crazy thing works. If a game is 100 percent deterministic, then only one tactic works. The more randomness you add, the wider the range of options becomes. When your game is 100 percent random, every option is equally viable, right, which we don't want either. So the critical-hit system was us saying we want to specifically tune this stuff, whereas it's just fallen into place in the past.

GFW: One side effect I see is similar to gambler's logic. I call them old nerds' tales. For example, someone insists the likelihood of hitting criticals increases when he's outnumbered. Or that broken Demoman bottles do more damage.

RW: Yeah, people are generally terrible at establishing cause and effect where chance is involved. I've seen someone say, "I shot three crits after taunting. Taunting must cause crits."

GFW: How to play slot machines....

RW: Take your lucky coin and turn three times. We couldn't curb this if we tried. And it's a way of coping in cases where an opponent wins.

GFW: And that's the other side effect: blaming losses on luck.

RW: That was intentional. One way hardcore players salvage their egos is by saying that the other guys got lucky. Their egos are very much tied into how much fun they're having, and so the system explicitly lets them feel like they weren't beaten fairly. And the reality is, if not crits, they'd find other reasons, right?

GFW: At one point, you planned to sync players' VOIP [voice over IP] input to the characters' faces....

RW: Yeah, we talked about it a bunch. We got more mileage out of facial states—like characters looking afraid when their health is low.

GFW: Is this an area where you can continue to add to the game?

RW: Funny you should mention that. We're actually bringing all the voice actors back. You're not just going to get more maps from us; our plan is to keep pushing everything. More dialogue—you'll hear really, really rare lines sometimes—and more reactions, like characters encouraging teammates to come stand on the damn capture points already.

GFW: Or yelling at the Medic who only has eyes for Heavies. Are you happy with the predominantly Medic-Heavy pairings you see in public servers?

RW: Heavies have a few significant weaknesses, specifically to Snipers. Plus, Spies are pretty dangerous to Medic-Heavy combos. Internally here, Snipers shut down Heavy pushes. We started seeing more invulnerable Demos and Soldiers.

In general, you want to threaten them into using their invulnerability. And then you pull back [and] let them push. When their invuln is over, you kick the s*** out of them. One problem we see is people still shooting invulnerable [enemies].

GFW: And that's actually another old nerds' tale, that you can decrease the duration of their invulnerability with concentrated fire.

RW: Really! I hadn't seen that one. I mean, as a Soldier or a Demo, I'll sometimes still keep shooting the invuln, but I'm trying to bounce them because if you separate them the Medic's beam breaks. If Medics aren't starting to realize the value of assisting other classes, though, we'll think about tuning something.

Right now, übercharge buildup is based on the health of the target. In other words, if you're healing a Heavy and there are three other guys around you who all have full health, you'll get no bonus for switching. We'll probably start rewarding you specifically for switching targets—encourage you to spread that love around.

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Reviews

Opinions you can trust

Human dudes keep the Internet safe from alien dudes in *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

One big holiday game is noticeable by its absence from this month's reviews section: Infinity Ward's *Call of Duty 4*. As this issue's deadline approached, the folks at Activision (*COD4*'s publisher) graciously arranged for us to receive a reviewable version of the game, under the necessary condition that we play the online mode against other journalists and Infinity Ward developers, since live servers and real players were obviously not possibilities prior to release.

Truthfully, that sort of setup *is* reasonable under certain circumstances—like when, say, multiplayer is a negligible fraction of a game's overall value. And in the magazine biz, we're committed to providing reviews that are as timely as possible. But, more importantly, we're committed to providing *accurate, credible* reviews, which is why we politely declined this early shot at *COD4*. The multiplayer is level-based (think MMOs, although to a lesser extent) with rewards based on achievements and experience; five or six hours against a handful of writers and devs certainly don't paint a full picture, and we'd rather wait a month than fake our way through the discussion. Fair, no? **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

INSIDE

BANG

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

Givin' *Team Fortress 2* something to fight for.

CLICK

Age of Empires III: Asian Dynasties

Age of samurai and ninjas. Hii-ya!

EEEEEH

F.E.A.R.: Perseus Mandate

Series creator Monolith sits out this expansion—so is it any good?

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award

Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a *GFW* Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent

Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good

Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average

Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad

Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible

Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW

REVIEW CREW 1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
The guys down there are the unsung champions of a *very* short production cycle. Mad props!
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR
After suffering through *Jericho*, Darren feels like hammering nails into his skull.
Current Faves: *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

TOM CHICK
STAFF REVIEWER
Tom Chick is a highfalutin, Ivy League–educated, beret-wearing ponce who lives in Los Angeles.
Current Faves: *Age of Empires III*
1UP.com Blog: tomchick.1UP.com

GORD GOBLE
STAFF REVIEWER
"Goble. Gord Goble." If you ever hear those words, you're probably pretty much done for.
Current Faves: *TimeShift*
1UP.com Blog: gordholio.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Don't worry, ma'am—Eric is from the Internet.
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2, Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*
1UP.com Blog: TheFrimFramSauce.1UP.com

JOE RYBICKI
STAFF REVIEWER
Crysis reminds Joe of when he tripled his Tandy's memory to 384K to play *Ultima V*.
Current Faves: *BioShock*
1UP.com Blog: OPMJoeR.1UP.com

MATTHEW SAKEY
STAFF REVIEWER
Matt still has to convince people that "game consultant and journalist" is a real job.
Current Faves: *BioShock, Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: msakey.1UP.com

CINDY YANS
STAFF REVIEWER
The MMO police appeared with handcuffs to rescue Cindy from her recent FPS distraction.
Current Faves: *Portal, BioShock, EverQuest II*
1UP.com Blog: Cindy_Yans.1UP.com

TODD ZUNIGA
STAFF REVIEWER
Todd's got the blues: Cubs lost, Broncos stink, and José Mourinho's left Chelsea. Ugh.
Current Faves: *DiRT*
1UP.com Blog: sportsguy.1UP.com

1UP NETWORK

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There's a reason these Strogg gunships are called "Tormentors."

NOT SINCE *UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2003* HAS A MULTIPLAYER GAME SHIPPED WITH AN A.I. THIS LIVELY, CONVINCING, AND EFFECTIVE.

Rocket launcher vs. grenade? Who will win?

Leading with a grenade is a great way to make a memorable entrance.

ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

The smartest shooter in the room is also one of the sexiest

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **id/Splash Damage** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM (768MB in Windows Vista), 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

• *Quake Wars* is one of the brownest games since, well, *Quake*.

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE Games for Windows

It's possible this isn't the most meticulously built team-based shooter ever made, but that's not for lack of trying; *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* shows every sign of a talented developer mulling long and hard over how to make things work better, faster, and stronger. If you listen closely, under the din of thundering howitzers, thudding grenades, snarling Stroggs, and a Goliath's whining servos, you can almost hear developer Splash Damage thinking.

The design mandates are clear: The action must never let up, it must always focus on a single location, a player must always have a choice of very specific tasks, teamwork must always overcome numbers, and the two sides must be distinct (how very timely that Splash Damage insists warfare is an asymmetrical affair). At first, this seems like a frenetic and splashy jump-in-and-have-fun sci-fi shooter. But *Quake Wars* is a calculated design, carefully crafted by people who have learned a lot in the decade between *Team Fortress* and *Team Fortress 2*.

Although you get "only" 12 maps, you'll discover an impressive amount of variety. Each map poses at least three objectives, each its own tactical puzzle. How do you protect a moving target? How do you defend three hallways? How do you get Covert Ops players into that little courtyard? How do you carry this briefcase into that fortified valley? And, of course, how do you do it with the teammates you have?

WHAT'S THE CORKSCREW FOR?

The tools to solve these tactical puzzles are the different classes, each a Swiss Army knife of sub-tools. Every class has a place at any given moment, and it changes with the objectives. Snipers must descend from the hills to hack a shield generator from time to time. Heavy gunners might have to put down the Hyperblaster and plant a plasma charge. Defenders will go on the offensive; wide-open battles will move indoors, with both the attacker and defender taking turns bitching that this map is unbalanced. The winds of *Quake Wars* are constantly changing direction—like with the weather in New England, if you don't like the current situation, just wait a little while.

Most servers run three-map campaigns, during which you'll unlock bonuses based on how you play. This adds just the right amount of persistence, and it gives you incentive to stick with one class. If you just spent the last map unlocking that scoped assault rifle, you're not going to want to give it up by switching classes. Similarly, if you get enough kills with a vehicle, you'll want to keep using vehicles to take advantage of the unlockable damage bonus. *Quake Wars* encourages and rewards consistent roles over willy-nilly seat-of-your-pants running-and-gunning.

FIGHTING A ONE-MAN WAR

Although it's eminently accessible, it's equally deep. But Splash Damage doesn't just throw you into the deep end of the Internet; one of *Quake Wars*' unique selling points is that it works just fine as a single-player game. Not since *Unreal Tournament 2003* has a multiplayer game shipped with an A.I. this lively, convincing, and effective. The bots here know how to use all the toys, and they aren't just ruthlessly efficient. One of the best ways to wrap your head around the gameplay and learn the maps is to jump right in with a mess of easy bots. You might not even notice the lack of a tutorial.

Whatever Splash Damage and id did with the *Doom 3* engine ("megatextures" was a commonly used buzzword), it works: A gorgeous and muscular outdoor engine has busted out of mere space dungeons to paint deserts, canyons, and forests from a palette of *Quake*ly brooding browns and oranges, with a hint of GDF olive drab, and even a splash of ocean blue on a couple of maps.

Quake Wars is dropping into the middle of a competitive genre—enemy territory, indeed. When it comes to teaming up and shooting other people online, plenty of good games come to mind. Even a middling game comes alive when you play with other people. But when a game is built as carefully as *Quake Wars*—for play online and offline, for new players and veterans, for quick thrills and long learning curves, for hyper action and careful tactics—this is as good as it gets.

• **Tom Chick**

VERDICT

- **Accessible, fast, and gorgeous; lots of tactical depth; excellent bots for offline single-player games.**
- **Could have used a tutorial; 12 maps seem like too few.**

9\10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

Gesundheit!

F.E.A.R.: PERSEUS MANDATE

Frighteningly uneven

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **TimeGate** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.7GHz CPU (2.2GHz for Windows Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB for Windows Vista), 8GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

The thing I like about supernatural shooters is that they can really mix up the FPS formula. You don't always have to slog through the clichéd settings of parking garages and office buildings and....

What's that, Captain? We're going to work our way through the office building that was the setting of the original game? Starting with the parking garage? I see. Well, it could be worse; at least we won't have to do anything trite and overdone like, I dunno, making our way to the computer core and accessing the mainframe or something.

We are? *Really?* You mean, like we do in *every other game* set in a modern office building? Well, it could be a lot worse, right? At least I can look forward to a few trademark *F.E.A.R.* jump-out-of-your-seat moments.

FEAR ITSELF

Or...not? As each level passes, it seems less and less likely that this stand-alone expansion will offer the caliber of genuine scares the original did; instead, I'm just blasting away at hordes of Replicant soldiers. It's entertaining enough, but it's not exactly what I signed on for. Yeah, once in a while, things get a *little* creepy, but the designers probably could've raised the scare quotient a bit by not telegraphing most of the supernatural elements with the utterly obvious—ohgodwhatthehellwas*that?*

The preceding narrative is sort of how *Perseus Mandate* works: It spends the first few levels diligently lowering the bar of your expectations...then it starts surprising you. I don't know if the designers deliberately infused the first three "intervals" with FPS clichés and bland environments to instill a false sense of security or what. What I do know: Once you move into Interval 4, the entire tone of the game changes. Enemies become more interesting and far scarier; levels gain a creepy, ruined aesthetic that really jacks up the atmosphere; and encounters with the supernatural become significantly more frequent. But not so frequent, I should note, that you become desensitized to them...just frequent enough to keep you dreading whatever's around the next corner.

> THESE GUYS CAN SEE YOU IN ABSOLUTE DARKNESS.

JUST KEEP SHOOTING

And I do mean *dreading*, because in addition to its uneven level quality, atmosphere, and enemy design, *Perseus Mandate* has moments of almost absurd difficulty. This is partly legitimate; enemies behave more intelligently than in most shooters, and while this sometimes works in your favor (they often maintain cover long enough for you to recharge your slow-mo ability), it often means getting flanked and surrounded at every opportunity.

But this difficulty's sometimes also caused by your enemies' inhuman senses; these guys can see you in absolute darkness and apparently hear your hair growing from the next room. On one memorable occasion, I was spotted (and shot at) through a brick wall. That's not exactly fair.

Fundamentally, *Perseus Mandate* offers more of what made the original *F.E.A.R.* a hit. It just doles it out in oddly imbalanced amounts, interspersing long periods of more-of-the-same with occasional flashes of innovation. It's no classic, but it's competent enough to give horror fans a satisfying fix. **Joe Rybicki**

VERDICT

- **Smart enemies; usually good atmosphere; some moments of real fright.**
- **Lots of cookie-cutter enemies, levels, and plot elements; uneven difficulty.**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows: THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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Jericho doesn't do "subtle" very well.

CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO

Tom Clancy's *Hellraiser*

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **Mercury Steam/Alchemic Productions** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.gametap.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, GeForce 6600/Radeon X1600 videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

SPOILER ALERT: After battling evil through time, with the "big bad" awaiting you at the climax, your elite demon-busters dive into the water. Then the closing credits roll. That's exactly how *Clive Barker's Jericho* ends. I'm all for ambiguous endings—but this makes about as much sense to you right now as it did to me after 12 hours in gaming hell. Maybe I'm still there, trapped inside the Pyxis and forced to relive my struggles by writing a review. At least that'd be some kind of conclusion.

Jericho starts with a great premise: You're part of a secret branch of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps that's really a mystic SEAL team specializing in occult warfare. True to form, Barker's vision for the cursed city of Al-Khali bubbles over with tortured, disfigured, and downright grim creatures. Hang in there for Barker's take on *Dune*'s Baron Harkonnen for a real "treat."

However, even the greatest story ever told translates to videogame garbage if you don't understand the medium. *Jericho* is a clumsy collision of good ideas, and as the game struggles to tell an interesting tale, it keeps throwing in gimmicks to distract you.

Comically frustrating button-bashing events are perfect examples of *Jericho*'s insanity. When one of the many scripted interactive "cinematic survival events" begins, you have nanoseconds to react. Miss a beat and you die—locked into the same lame looping sequence until you give up, the computer gives up, or you successfully complete it. That's not just plain evil—it's utterly pointless.

HELL IS FOR IDIOTS

As for the team gameplay, *Jericho* is a lot like hanging out with six slightly annoying pals. Individually, they're cool...but after you're all locked together in an interdimensional hell for a couple hours, you're ready to brain someone. Each squad member has an intriguing mix of paranormal abilities, like the power to control bullets telekinetically or slow time. The game briefly shines during the few sequences when the team splits up and you're only focusing on one or two troopers. That way, it's easy to get deeper into their individual play styles. Most times, though, it's just a big mess on the battlefield.

JERICHO'S TEAM GAMEPLAY IS A LOT LIKE HANGING OUT WITH SIX ANNOYING PALS.

The problem comes with everyone else you're not controlling. Here's a game that screams "Multiplayer Co-op!" and yet, all we get is a single-player squad-based game, desperately lacking in good A.I. Shout out the "Follow me" command to these short-bus Ghostbusters, and more often then not, the team runs headlong into danger (as in directly into the line of fire). Saddled with the ability to heal others on the battlefield, my job goes from frontline fighter to medic and crossing guard. Wanna know how to win the game? Tell the troops to hang back until you need 'em.

Forget encouraging teamwork—the game fights you every step of the way. The reward for all that effort: an unfulfilling hard stop, like Codemasters—or Barker—just ran out of steam. Well, at least this review has a definite end: Avoid *Jericho*. **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **Unique characters with an interesting premise.**
- **Bad A.I. and horrible button-mashing cut-scene games—am I in hell?**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

The dead dance with Delgado's fire elemental.

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Asian Dynasties is set from the late 15th to the late 19th century.

AGE OF EMPIRES III: THE ASIAN DYNASTIES

Fantastic dreams of rickshaws and elephants

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Ensemble/Big Huge Games** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, *Age of Empires III*** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE Games for Windows

Columbus may have made a few small errors while trying to find his way to the East Indies, but it's apparent that Big Huge Games did not. In *The Asian Dynasties* (the second expansion to *Age of Empires III*), series developer Ensemble partners up with the folks from Big Huge, trusting that its *Rise of Nations* roots—along with creative director Brian Reynolds' design legacy—would do justice to the *Age* franchise. It's in good hands.

Big Huge threw out the "personal touch" of the *WarChiefs* expansion's campaigns, returning to more historic material. While something could be said for "Lizzie the Pirate" types of stories, something's more...intense, perhaps, about focusing on things like the events surrounding the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, which is the crux of the game's three-campaign series. While the other two campaigns seem a bit "Asian lite," this final Indian campaign definitely feels more sensational. Could the presence of flail elephants have anything to do with this?

DON'T GIVE TOO MUCH OF A *RISE*

Although proponents of the *Rise of Nations* games were hoping that a lot of the essence of that series would bleed through into this one, it doesn't. You can see a number of *RON* influences, though—particularly in the way that *Dynasties* handles Wonders. Wonders were all but gone in *AOE3*, but this game integrates them spectacularly well with the civilization-advancement system. When it's time to tech up to the next age, you just tap a villager on the shoulder, and your age advancement and Wonder construction are concurrent. It works really well...until you decide you've chosen the worst possible Wonder for your civ at the time.

You also won't see a trace of expanding borders and attrition, but the fourth resource, export, can virtually enlarge your borders with the abilities to recruit foreign allies and hone in on other countries' technologies. Export is a small percentage of your overall resource gain, and its effective use is subtle, but it can really turn the tide.

UP YOUR RALLY

The truly die-hard RTS player never has enough hotkeys, but *Dynasties* brings sufficient new ones to really boost your multiplayer speed. While you can't rally to specific select groups, you can build and rally troops from an entire set of barracks and set the stance of unit types. Alt-Y, however, gives you something you've *always* wanted to do: "Move all military units *here*." When your ally is in trouble, or you're about to lose your Town Center, or [insert any emergency], at the flick of a hotkey combo, you forsake all other stands. *Not* choosing this option takes practice, especially for novices.

It looks so remarkable that you'll want to play zoomed in at all times, so yeah (ahem), you do that. And die a thousand deaths in any gameplay mode. But it's OK...in *Asian Dynasties*, it's always cherry blossom season, whether your ass is on the line or not. **Cindy Yans**

VERDICT	9\10
◘ **New hotkeys; interesting age advancement dynamic; new export resource.**	EXCELLENT
◘ **Moderately clumsy interface; single-player campaigns feel "token."**	Games for Windows

The new India faction gets lots o' free villagers.

ALT-Y GIVES YOU SOMETHING YOU'VE *ALWAYS* WANTED TO DO: "MOVE ALL MILITARY UNITS *HERE*."

This sleepy burg will be perfect for providing me with the resources I need to promote my hero unit.

THE SETTLERS: RISE OF AN EMPIRE

Settled once too often

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Blue Byte** GENRE: **Simulation** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Some designers are like obsessed ex-girlfriends: They just keep trying and trying, even though the ship sailed for calmer waters long ago. Blue Byte, I love ya. I respect ya. But it's been nearly 15 years of the *Settlers* series...and the latest version, *Rise of an Empire*, just doesn't do anything that we haven't seen a million times before. So, please—stop calling.

CHAIN OF FOOLS

While *Rise* and games like it are often called "city-builders," what's really at stake aren't roads and buildings, but supply chains. Plop down a hunter's hut to provide venison, which converts into sausages, which feed the iron miners, who get iron to the blacksmith, who bangs out swords, which soldiers equip so they can kill people. The more diverse and efficient your supply chain, the more your town can grow, and the more taxes you can take in, which means you can hire more soldiers and thus kill more people. Fun!

Problem is, the more efficient your supply chain, the less for you to actually *do*. *Rise* adds "spouses" (the first bona fide female settlers in a *Settlers* game) to the mix, but garnering these much-touted wives requires no more than a single mouse click. Generally, unless you're given specific tasks in a campaign mission, you can count on spending the majority of your time gazing at the (admittedly top-drawer) graphics as your city chugs along, ant farm–like, in the background. But unlike, say, baseball, computer-gaming can't consist of sitting around doing nothing 90 percent of the time; when a game ends up more boring as you improve at it, something is outta joint.

RESPECT

On the plus side, *Rise* retains a few kernels of its old ineffable charm. Gradually growing your lands from horse-trough, mud-road shantytowns to cobblestone-and-alabaster metropolises never tarnishes. And the addition of multiplayer means you can whoop it up with three friends as you go gaga over some white-knuckle urban planning excitement! OK, so it ain't *Team Fortress 2*, but playing with a buddy helps alleviate the thumb-twiddling of the single-player experience.

> COMPUTER-GAMING CAN'T CONSIST OF SITTING AROUND DOING NOTHING 90 PERCENT OF THE TIME.

Still, this game's fundamentally flawed in ways that no human opponent could remedy. *Rise* suffers from a control interface that improbably encompasses both oversimplicity and utter opaqueness. Basic acts—like placing a building or rotating the map—require a two-fisted approach, while setting waypoints for troops is stripped out of the game entirely in the name of simplicity.

These details merely orbit the core problem: The *Settlers* series needs some new designers. I can't dismiss its shortcomings as a genre issue; competitor Sunflowers' similar *Anno* series, for example, is excellent. Instead, Blue Byte needs to ask itself some hard questions about just where it strayed from success. Until it's willing to confront those questions, its flagship series will continue foundering on the shoals of obscurity. **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **Decent at the city-building basics; charming graphics and animation.**
- **Brings little innovation to an already tired series.**

5\10
AVERAGE

Games for Windows

It's a celebration, bitches!

FIFA SOCCER 08

The beauty's on the inside

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EA Canada** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.3GHz CPU (1.5GHz in Windows Vista), 256MB RAM (512MB in Windows Vista), 3.9GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

In an industry where evolution is key, it's hard to believe that a relic from yesteryear can look as good as today's version of the same game. But in a side-by-side comparison, EA's antiquated *FIFA Soccer 2002* looks more colorful, more distinct, and almost as detailed as *FIFA 08*. The PC version of *08* is strikingly similar to the version PlayStation 2 cheapskates will see on *their* budget-bin machines this year. Meanwhile, new-gen console owners once again get to play *FIFA* in all its high-res, highly animated glory. Serves us right for dropping all that coin on monster desktops, huh?

Yet as comparatively blah as it looks, the PC version of *FIFA 08* shouldn't be taken lightly. The series has morphed over the past few years from what was essentially an arcade-type affair to a slower, more sophisticated, more credible simulation. That trend continues in *08*, as does the game's emphasis on complex button manipulation. Ultimately, with noticeably improved A.I. behavior and positioning and new concepts such as manual through passes and defender switching, *FIFA*'s more challenging than ever.

AS BLAH AS IT LOOKS, *FIFA 08* SHOULDN'T BE TAKEN LIGHTLY.

But the niftiest innovation may well be the pseudo-RPG "Be a Pro" mode, wherein you control just a single player that you create, guiding him through task-oriented games and seasons and helping him "evolve." It's an entirely different experience that *FIFA* vets should enjoy, if just for what it teaches about the mechanics of the sport.

A humongous game built around 12,500 real-life players with more modes and teams and options than a stadium has face painters, *FIFA 08* is a superior soccer experience despite its ho-hum facade. **Gord Goble**

What better spot to watch an MLS game than from directly behind the net?

VERDICT

Improved A.I.; more manual control; intriguing new "Be a Pro" mode.

Disappointing graphics; not ideal for button minimalists and arcade junkies.

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

NBA LIVE 08

Indefensibly bad

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **HB Studios** GENRE: **Sports** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.easports.com)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 3.8GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

It's ironic that the crowd in *NBA Live 08*—EA's latest PC hoops turd—chants "Defense! Defense!" on nearly every possession. Not because only six or seven onlookers are clapping to produce this thundering sound, but because defense (as in previous installments of *Live*) isn't a viable part of the game. If you force a dribbler to the sidelines, the referees won't whistle him out of bounds, even if he takes two full steps over the line. If you quadruple-team the opposition's best player, he can still knife to the bucket and jump high enough to dunk. If your opponent clangs iron with a shot, good luck snaring a rebound with your awkwardly jumping, position-ignorant A.I. teammates.

If all of this sounds familiar, your déjà vu's likely inspired by last year's *NBA Live 07*—and *08*'s pretty much identical (only it looks even more aged now). EA's bothered to litter in a few positives, like the FIBA leagues that allow you to take the U.S.A.'s Dream Team Redux into battle against Europe and South America. And while simulating games in franchise mode—because they're too frustrating to actually play—you're asked to jump in to seal the deal (down by three with 30 seconds left, down by 10 with five minutes left), which is very cool. Beyond those two pluses, it's a string of negatives that makes Ron Artest look like a model citizen. **Todd Zuniga**

IF ALL OF THIS SOUNDS FAMILIAR, YOUR DÉJÀ VU'S LIKELY INSPIRED BY LAST YEAR'S *NBA LIVE 07*.

The defense can't stop Warriors guard Baron Davis (*or anyone*) from gliding to the bucket.

VERDICT

FIBA leagues; franchise sim features.

Awful gameplay; ugly-lookin'; coaches stand inside the announcers' tables.

3\10

BAD

Games for Windows

BLAZING ANGELS 2: SECRET MISSIONS OF WWII

Down in flames

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (http://digitalstore.ubi.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

The *GFW* style guide states that reviewers are to avoid using unnecessary profanity. This presents a problem, since it's difficult to discuss *Blazing Angels 2* without expletives...but I'll try if I must.

Why is profanity necessary? Because *BA2* is so obviously a clumsy, careless Xbox 360 port—a frame-a-second crawl, even on extraordinarily powerful systems. Because it inexplicably stopped playing voiceovers halfway through the game and nothing—not even reinstalling—made them come back. Because even though it's a 360 game first and foremost, it flatly refused to acknowledge my 360 USB controller. Because gameplay is sluggish and unresponsive, to the point of ignoring frantic repeated clicking of mouse and keyboard while your craft screams toward the unforgiving ground.

But it's also necessary because an obviously awesome arcade flight-combat game lurks somewhere in there. *BA2* makes you *feel* the dogfights, the dizzying, vertigo-inducing combat, the wail of air raid sirens, the *nyyyaaarrroooowwm* of diving bombers, and the puffy flak blossoms. Somewhere inside the ruin of unmanageable controls and awful performance is a game experience that would qualify as nearly exquisite...if it worked.

Cooperative multiplayer breathes extended life into the 18-mission campaign, and a variety of competitive modes are available for aerial fraggers. But whether you're playing online or off, you just can't shake the feeling that the PC version of *Blazing Angels 2* is a messy afterthought, made all the more disappointing for wasted potential. **Matthew Sakey**

Awesome boss battles, like with this monster German zeppelin, round out clever missions.

SOMEWHERE INSIDE THE RUIN OF UNMANAGEABLE CONTROLS AND AWFUL PERFORMANCE IS A GAME EXPERIENCE THAT WOULD QUALIFY AS NEARLY EXQUISITE...IF IT WORKED.

VERDICT

4/10

BAD

+ Beautiful visuals; inventive missions; impressive variety of craft.

– Unresponsive controls; tortiselike performance; annoying checkpoint save.

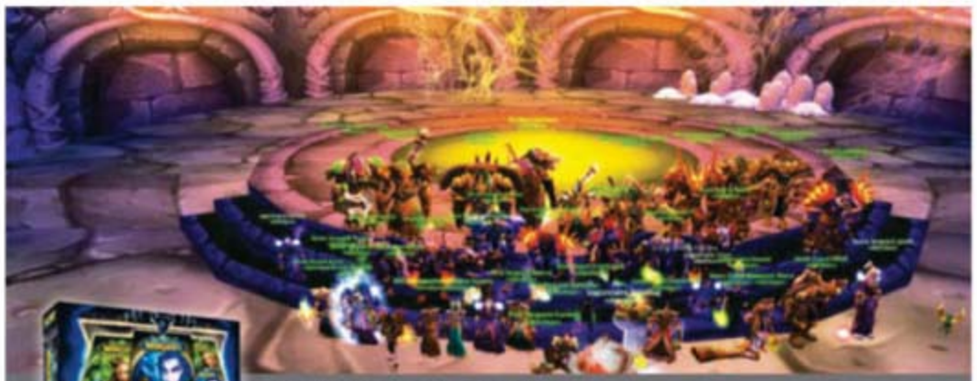
Games for Windows

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

PREPARING FOR 2008

Hyped for next year's biggest-name games after reading our Top 10 of 2008 feature? Now's as good a time as any to make sure you're all caught up—here are five ways to do just that.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT

At this point, we're guessing that you either: a) are hopelessly addicted to *World of WarCraft*, b) don't dig MMOs, or c) shun *WOW* out of some pretentious belief that Blizzard's world-dominating titan somehow *can't* be all that, if casual gamers and bored housewives play alongside the overcaffeinated hardcore. To that last group: Get over it, already. Whether you're into solo play, group questing, player-versus-player combat, or massive 40-man day-killers, *WOW*'s got something to offer you.

F.E.A.R.

As everyone hopefully knows by now, Monolith Productions' upcoming *Project: Origin* is *F.E.A.R. 2* in all but name, since *F.E.A.R.* publisher Vivendi Games owns said name... but none of the characters or story ideas (sucks for Vivendi, in light of its breakup with Monolith). If you missed out on the original's chilling atmosphere, *Ring*-like little girls, and freakishly perceptive A.I., the new Platinum Collection delivers the whole shebang, including Monolith's *Extraction Point* expansion and TimeGate's *Perseus Mandate* expansion (see our review on pg. 68).

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

The poster child for reformed PC vaporware, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* sends first-person-shooter fans into a postapocalyptic wasteland for an experience that shares as much in common with *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* as it does with other shooters. The rails on this particular track are removed (or at least masterfully disguised), and players are tasked with the burden of choice: Pursue "the story," or go see what's...*over there*? If this is what six years of delays does to a game, we wish more developers would make a point of missing deadlines.

STARCRAFT

South Korea's national sport—and the most beloved and enduring real-time strategy game of the past decade—finally gets the sequel treatment in 2008. We can't quite imagine an eager *StarCraft II* fan (or any RTS fan, really) who *isn't* already familiar with Blizzard's sci-fi magnum opus, but if you missed out on *StarCraft* or its critically acclaimed *Brood War* expansion, they're handily bundled together in the dirt-cheap ($20!) *StarCraft Battle Chest*.

FAR CRY

German developer Crytek may be making headlines with FPStravaganza *Crysis*, but it made its bones (and its rep) with a sleeper called *Far Cry*. Coalescing unexpectedly from the phlogiston of European game design, it owned all categories from cutting-edge visual effects to freeform mission design to challenging A.I. If you're making a list of old shooters you need to play, *Far Cry* should be near the top.

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Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

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REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

SEGA RALLY REVO

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Sega Racing Studio** GENRE: **Racing** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad/racing wheel recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

Clearly designed for console—what with its mouseless menus—*Sega Rally Revo* is nonetheless just as startlingly beautiful on the PC. Not a traditional rally (you race door-to-door with your competitors), it's fast, furious fun that is best enjoyed online where real humans put up a more engaging fight than the robotic A.I. Yet the thrills are fleeting: *Revo* is bereft of standard racing perks such as vehicular upgrades, garages, and damage. But for racing newbies, that deformable terrain and those muddy jungles and snow-covered mountain passes are magic.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED

PUBLISHER: **CDV Software** DEVELOPER: **Frogwares** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.3GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

What better Victorian literary figure for an adventure/mystery title than Sherlock Holmes? *The Awakened* pairs the best of Doyle with the macabre tendencies of Lovecraft, culminating in a haunting little game. You play, in turns, as Holmes and Watson in a well-paced, but linear, first-person point-and-click adventure. The plot paves the way for classic adventure-puzzle fare: some steampunk *CSI*-ish lab work, some logic problems, some inventory-based puzzles, and even the occasional skimming of documents for missed clues. Even when the game plods, it maintains an ominous ambience. In the end, it's every bit as satisfying as a rainy-day novel.

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TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

WORLD IN CONFLICT

Freedom vs. A.I.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **Massive Entertainment** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** ESRB RATING: **Teen**

●There goes the neighborhood!

COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

The game is *World in Conflict*. The combatants are Tom and Bruce as America, and the A.I. as Russia. The map is X-Mas.

BRUCE: Not many things can bring me back from important business a month early, but longtime readers of this column will know that one such thing is an appeal to help defend America, made by personal phone call from Our Fine President. Sure, that's not what happened here, but you can still put that down on the list of things that would get my attention...if you happen to be on staff at the White House and you read this column.

TOM: Here's the situation: This is a lovely map of a peaceful wintry Everytown, U.S.A., decked out in colored lights, snowmen, and Pray for Our Troops billboards. It's all very Currier and Ives/Norman Rockwell/Republican Party. It's the night before Christmas and the Russians are coming, the Russians are coming! We start at the north end; they start at the south. The goal is to control the majority of the map's five control points long enough to convert a victory gauge to your flag. We've set up a game using "Few Mode"—which is geared, as you might imagine, for fewer players. Normally, *World in Conflict* is one of those team-based games where everyone chooses a class and dies a lot. But Few Mode is a rather clunky attempt to make it play like a conventional RTS.

BRUCE: Longtime readers will also recall my continued wholehearted support for American insurgents in 1980s protodocumentary *Red Dawn*, and when a game comes out that so obviously tries to evoke this prescient film without having to pay licensing fees to Paramount, I'm likely to play on the side of the Wolverines. And I'm not talking the kind that go and lose at home to Appalachian State. Those Wolverines would have been taken out by Cuban paratroopers before they could even get their berets.

TOM: During Bruce's repeated exhortations that "this is just like *Red Dawn*," I remind him that "I was in junior high, d***head." I immediately feel bad that he doesn't realize it's a quote from *Die Hard*, but it makes me wonder how he knows about *Red Dawn*.

BRUCE: Speaking of berets, Tom surprised the heck out of me by offering to join me on the side of freedom, in a co-op defense of Christmas against Russian Orthodox calendar abuse. That's the map we decided to play on: X-Mas—a snowy little American suburb, with its high school and mall, about to be overrun by T-80s and Hinds. A veritable left-wing fantasy.

Throughout this article, I'm going to refer to Tom and myself as "We," because I think it's the only way to get through to Tom that if we lose, I am not the only person who won't be playing any more videogames. I don't mean "lose" as in "lose our game of *World in Conflict*," either.

TOM: What actually happened is that we did a few test games with Bruce and me playing against each other. They were about as competitive as that time the U.S. invaded Grenada. I'll let you guess who was Grenada and who was the U.S. (hint: Bruce was Grenada). So, to make things a bit more interesting, I suggested that we should team up and play against the A.I. [*sic*]. Granted, this would give Bruce fewer opportunities to joke about how I'm supposed to be a U.N.-loving Communist, but he seems to be managing just fine regardless. Also, it's worth noting that *World in Conflict*'s A.I. [*sic*] isn't capable of much beyond simply throwing a bunch of units to their deaths. We'll consider this a representation of the state of Russian military readiness, ruthlessness, and finesse in the 1980s.

BRUCE: Yeah, whatever. Since I was in Los Angeles last month, Tom and I decided we could easily play a few games against each other in person. Right. Remind me never to do that again. He has his PCs all macro'd up so that all he has to do is think, and all his units go where he tells them. On the >

• A Cobra gunship patrols the mean streets of X-Mas.

other hand, my PC (the one with the spyware on it, I'm sure) was probably running a pirated version of Linux that was emulating Windows running on a Macintosh Windows emulator. Don't think that all they do at Tom's LAN parties is play games. They're also pretty good with the haxoring.

TOM: The three rules of competitive RTS games are hotkeys, hotkeys, hotkeys. The hotkeys in *World in Conflict* are awesome. It's even got a hotkey to order your infantry indoors, at which point they immediately and automatically run into the nearest building. To some people, this might seem like cheating. Any sufficiently advanced interface is indistinguishable from haxoring.

BRUCE: *World in Conflict* designer Patrick Swayze realized right away that if the Russians were going to invade small-town U.S.A., we would need to defend our high schools. So one of the objectives is cleverly named "high school," and I move to secure it with tanks, APCs, and attack helicopters. I guess we won't see any more smokin' in the boys' room! Man, I am on fire!

TOM: While Bruce plays hall monitor, I secure the farm. These are the two control points nearest to our side of the map. Unlike Bruce, I make sure to park my forces at the farm long enough so that defensive emplacements are built. That's another nice touch in *World in Conflict*: It's a very fast-paced game, but it rewards players who take time to advance methodically. Bruce, on the other hand, immediately rushes into the west suburbs, which are the sprawling control point in the center of the map. His willingness to dive recklessly into a military quagmire reminds me of a certain president.

BRUCE: Tom is so into cheap shots, I'll bet he's really good at *Soul Calibur*. Can't we just enjoy the fact that we're both repulsing a dastardly Russian invasion of the land of freedom? It's a glorious moment in gaming, but Tom just can't get his head out of *Mother Jones*.

TOM: I'm not sure what Bruce is going on about, as I was talking about Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam.

BRUCE: I guess that if you keep all your forces at the objective, it builds cool little defenses. Totally unrealistic, but a good game-design choice that makes you have to decide whether to push forward or consolidate your gains. Swayze is a genius.

TOM: So here's my plan: The farm is tucked behind a river, with a single bridge allowing access to the rest of the map. I bring out an engineer to use his special demolition skill to destroy the bridge. This should secure the farm and leave me free to fight in the west suburbs, where Bruce and I will entrench ourselves and therefore ensure victory by holding three of the five control points. My plan falls apart when I realize that the engineer's demolition skill isn't sufficient to blow the bridge with a single use. So by the time he's ready to set a second round of charges and drop the bridge, the computer has already attacked me several times, delaying my arrival to the west suburbs, where Bruce is doing most of the heavy lifting in terms of keeping the Russians from canceling Christmas.

BRUCE: Tom is defending the farm, which is odd since in real life he couldn't be bothered to credit anything to farmers, who probably say things like "nookular bomb." Do you say that? If so, Tom hates you. Or just disdains you. Which is worse?

TOM: While Bruce defends people who can't pronounce words correctly, the computer has now done an end run and attacked the high school, left undefended by someone who had nothing better to do than rush into the west suburbs. But Bruce knows the game well enough to bring in a couple of Apaches. Meanwhile, I finally blow the bridge, but forget to move my units across it first. Hoping Bruce won't notice and accuse me of being a Russian sympathizer, I begin the laborious process of driving my heavy tanks the long way around.

BRUCE: West suburbs is where Tom and I can create a killzone (not the game) for enemy troops coming north across a river. A river runs through it! Oh man, I am thinking of everything. The rock-paper-scissors dynamic is so clear-cut in this game that I almost wish they would just be rocks, paper, and scissors. But do you think Russia would invade us with rocks? No, they would use borscht! Yakov Smirnoff still does comedy routines in Branson, Missouri. Y'all should go check that out sometime.

TOM: Great, now the computer is sending amphibious infantry carriers over the river to attack the farm. Fortunately, Bruce's Apaches rush over and destroy them. My heavy tanks are slowly working their way toward the west suburbs.

BRUCE: Here comes a huge Russian armored column, headed for the west suburbs. Fortunately, the computer isn't doing a great job of providing antiair support. And when I say "not a great job," you should imagine the Russian antiair general "committing suicide" with a 9mm to the back of the head, because my Apaches are just chewing up the Russian tanks.

TOM: The back-and-forth in the west suburbs has inflicted a lot of property damage—the map doesn't look so Currier and Ives any more. In fact, it's got a bit of a Stalingrad-but-with-Christmas-lights vibe now. I've parked a couple of heavy tank reinforcements at the farm to shore up its defenses and handily destroy any amphibious vehicles. Bruce is doing a great job with the helicopters. He's even set up heavy artillery at the high school.

BRUCE: Artillery is the queen of the battlefield. No, wait, that's tanks. I can never really remember which chess piece is which implement of modern military destruction.

TOM: I refuse to let Bruce bait me into quoting Stalin's line about artillery being the god of war. Besides, everyone knows Kratos is the god of war.

BRUCE: My artillery completely shatters a Russian force concentrated on some innocent American hill, where some children had probably been sledding in years past, before people like Tom decided it would be better to live in North Korea and invited the Russians in.

TOM: If Bruce had listened to Alec Baldwin telling the game's backstory, he would know that the Russians invaded Seattle via cargo container. Anyway, we're definitely filling the victory gauge with the American flag. On their side of the map, the Russians hold objectives at the drive-in and east suburbs. We can easily push forward to the drive-in, which is a short distance from the west suburbs. But the east suburbs are going to be a bit difficult. They're a tiny neighborhood on a forested hill that's probably infested with elite Spetsnaz Russian troops—pretending for a moment that a) the sides in this game aren't entirely symmetrical with only cosmetic differences, and b) the A.I. [*sic*] is competent enough to put infantry in defensive terrain like forests. Furthermore, the only way to the east suburbs is up a winding hill. So it's time for the nuclear option.

BRUCE: *World in Conflict*'s got these neat things called "command points," which is like the modern equivalent of Middle-earthian command points in *The Battle for Middle-earth*, or World War II command points in *Company of Heroes*. Except in *World in Conflict*, you can buy a nuke. And that makes this the best game ever.

TOM: I figure I'm the better candidate for launching the nuclear strike, since—unlike Bruce—I actually care about the correct pronunciation of "nuclear." So I tell Bruce to give me all his command points, which we've been saving up. Fortunately, it's been relatively easy to beat back the A.I. [*sic*] without having to spend our points.

BRUCE: Even after I give Tom the points he needs for a nuke, I have enough left over to buy a B-52 strike. Arc Light! I can just see the Russian commander saying, "What's that? Every time I hear that noise, something terrible happens."

TOM: For some reason, Bruce orders a carpet bombing on exactly the same point where my nuclear strike marker is counting down. The carpet bombing run will arrive about three seconds before the nuke. I'm pretty sure that's a faux pas.

BRUCE: When Tom said he needed command points for a nuke, he didn't tell me what he was going to nuke. The whole command point menu has these pictographs that supposedly tell you what you're getting, but they all just look like a bunch of planes blowing things up. Fortunately, I know a B-52 when I see one, so I choose that. The B-52 strike arrives, but it's kind of swallowed up in the huge explosion that is the nuke. I wonder if they just loaded both on the same plane? In that case, why wasn't the computer pilot smart enough to ask, "Hey, why am I dropping both of these amazing superweapons on the same target?" Or maybe he *did*, but he kept quiet because he thought maybe it meant that it was aliens, like in that one movie...and he didn't want to let on that he knew, because the government would "disappear" him! I have a whole role-playing story worked out for things that happened outside the scope of this game. Contact me for details.

TOM: We've filled the victory gauge with three minutes and 17 seconds to go, at which point we would have won anyway. Bruce has 1,648 points to my 1,611 points.

BRUCE: We win! But I win more. •

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CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: *Horde of the Flies*

COLUMN

Sean Molloy

Sean likes to psychoanalyze vast quantities of people he's never met.

I've been to a county fair where monkeys with broken arms were strapped to ponies to "race" for the amusement of children; I've been a closeted homosexual 15-year-old in an all-male Catholic high school; yet, I've never encountered a social construct more strange and ruinous than an MMORPG guild. These petri dishes breed a disease called "drama," which is shorthand for "behavior generally only exhibited by sociopaths," by which I mean the sort of conduct you'd expect from spoiled British grade-schoolers stranded on a tropical island and left to build their own mockery of society. In my diverse MMO travels, I have seen the following character classes recur in every guild across every universe, their interlocking abilities forming a perfectly balanced raid against human decency. I am certain this is not the first such catalog to be compiled—nor will it be the last—but I feel it is the most *necessary*.

A sneaky variety of loot whore bred to live in a guild environment, the **Lootologist** tracks gear statistics with the precision of a quantum physicist—for the sole purpose of having a dense, confusing argument handy for why his Rogue should get to roll on Priest gear when it drops. A strong proponent for *laissez-faire* "need before greed" die rolls, he stands in staunch opposition to any "oppressive" regulatory DKP regime. Favorite quote: "Why does everyone keep saying I'm a loot whore?" In real life: self-taught Buddhist.

Recently transferred to your server from a mysterious "other server," the **Nomadic Messiah** craps rainbows, begins most sentences with "The way my old guild did it was...," and ends most arguments stating that he has full Strata 15B gear and you don't, so *he just knows better*. Don't bother asking "If your old guild was so great, then why did you leave it?"—because the answer is that he was kicked for being an egomaniacal twit. Favorite quote: "No, no, you have to stand by *this* rock when you buff." In real life: that creepy kid in math class who sits alone at lunch playing the travel version of *Connect Four* against himself.

The **Sycophant** tries to earn favor with (i.e. "suck up to") officers and leaders by praising even the most banal strategic decision ("The tank should tank? You are Sun Tzu!") and wonkiest guild policy. Allow me now to randomly point out that in the course of this discussion, I am most definitely *not* talking about anyone in my current guild, which is pure and good and never has any problems whatsoever, due to the valiant efforts of our strong, fearless leader, a regular *GFW* reader. Favorite quote: "You were *right* to demand I buy you an epic mount for your new girlfriend." In real life: Brainy Smurf.

Endlessly rerolling alternate characters is innocuous in and of itself...but the **Mainchanger** constantly turns them into "mains," requiring fellow guildmates to run instances they grew tired of long ago again and again and again to get him regeared for raids. Favorite quote: "The Mallet of Vindictive Wishes *again*? Too bad it didn't drop this many times when we were gearing one of my 19 Pallies LOLOL! Let's run it again." In real life: working on 18th master's degree in "the arts."

When drama inevitably explodes, the **Denialist** insists that "it's only a game!" and that "it's not worth it!" and eventually changes the guild message of the day to *"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down. —Oprah Winfrey."* Favorite quote: "La la la la la." In real life: Marge Simpson.

The most prevalent class, the **Shadow Loather** behaves toward the other classes quite civilly in public chat, but he secretly seethes, repeating *I hate you, I hate you* to himself, until he realizes that one of the subjects of his hatred is actually a Shadow Loather, too—at which point, they become best friends. Favorite quote: *"God, don't you hate him?"* In real life: videogame magazine editor. ●

● **Best class balance to violently create a splinter guild: Male Gnome Nomadic Messiah with Gnome Sycophant, along with Lootologist after recent DKP policy change.**

● **"I know this is meant for a Hobbit Minstrel, but as a Human Captain, I could use that +Fate bonus."**

● **Beware anyone who posts screenshots like this in your guild forum.**

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Bee Movie™ Game

Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Beenox Studios**

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Thrillville: Off the Rails

Publisher: **LucasArts** Developer: **Frontier Developments**

Thrillville: Off the Rails amps up this treasured series' family-friendly mix of gameplay with some of the most outlandish roller coaster concepts ever imagined, as well as new ways to talk to park guests and over 30 carnival-style minigames. *Off the Rails* lives up to its name with 20 new death-defying coasters so outrageous that they inspire the same word from every park visitor who sees them: "WHOA!" Players build these incredible "WHOA! coasters" to leap from one track to another, launch through the air like cannonballs, blast through burning rings of fire, and more.

Viva Piñata®

Games for Windows LIVE

Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** Developer: **Climax Group**

Originally developed and released to critical acclaim in November 2006 for the Xbox 360 by the creative masterminds at Rare Ltd, Climax Group brings *Viva Piñata* to the PC. In *Viva Piñata*, gamers create an immersive world where living piñatas inhabit an ever-changing garden environment. Beginning with basic tools, players build and take control of this environment, using their creativity and imagination to attract, protect, and manage over 60 different piñata species that can visit their garden and make it their home. Using hundreds of customizable elements, players can create a unique piñata paradise. Appealing to kids, adults, casual gamers, and enthusiasts alike, this uniquely customizable and social game rewards and challenges all players regardless of their skill level.

Zoo Tycoon® 2: Extinct Animals

Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** Developer: **Blue Fang Games**

Don't feed the dinosaurs! The biggest expansion pack yet for way-popular, award-winning simulation *Zoo Tycoon 2* is here, giving you the power to reach back into history and bring over 30 of Earth's most legendary animals back to life. From dodo birds to saber-toothed cats and even the mighty Tyrannosaurus rex, all can join your park as you search for hidden fossils, create new species in the Extinct Research Lab, or hunt for escaped dinos. Customize your zoo with new maps and buildings such as the Fossil Education Center and Cave Painting Hall, or add fun objects like glaciers, cavemen, and a Brachiosaurus slide for kids. Integrates seamlessly with *Zoo Tycoon 2*.

Spider-Man™: Friend or Foe

Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Next Level Games**

You won't believe who's on your side! Defeat Spider-Man's most infamous enemies like Venom™, Doc Ock™, and Green Goblin™ to add them to your epic array of playable allies in this movie trilogy–inspired adventure. Engage adversaries in battle with the help of swappable sidekicks capable of launching devastating combo attacks like Blade™, Iron Fist™, and Prowler™—then team up with rivals to master even more incredible fighting techniques! For the first time in a Spider-Man game, friends can join in the excitement via an action-packed co-op mode, letting you partner with a friend or sibling. From New York to Transylvania and Nepal, a host of unlockable characters like New Goblin™ and Silver Sable™ add to the web-slinging excitement.

Games for Windows

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For Adults

Age of Empires III®: The Asian Dynasties

Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** Developer: **Big Huge Games Inc.**

Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties is the second expansion pack for the massively successful *Age of Empires III*, which has sold over 2.5 million copies to date. Engaging gamers of all ages in building, ruling, and epic warfare with three great Asian civilizations in a rich and authentic setting, players will lead Japanese, Chinese, and Indian civilizations to expand their empires through innovative gameplay, exciting new single-player campaigns, and strategic combat.

Gears of War™

Games for Windows LIVE

Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** Developer: **Epic**

Gears of War™ is a third-person tactical action-horror game. As Marcus Fenix, you fight a war against the immense Locust Horde, which not only outpowers but outnumbers you, your squad, and all your allies. *Gears of War* is the only game to blend a deep story of human survival against an endless mass of nightmarish creatures, a next-generation tactical combat system, and unsurpassed special effects. The story unfolds as a ragtag group of soldiers fight to survive the onslaught from the forces of evil on the historic Emergence Day.

Hellgate: London

Publisher: **EA Partners** Developer: **Flagship Studios**

From the creators of the legendary *Diablo*, this action game takes place in a postapocalyptic London devastated by demons. In your merciless fight to send the demons back to hell, *Hellgate: London* lets you choose your combat style from the Templar class (hand-to-hand combat specialists) or the Cabalist class (magicians who use spells to defeat their enemies). Depending on what weapon you use, your viewpoint changes as you fight a variety of enemies through the streets of London, which have been accurately re-created. Plus, this game has multiplayer options, which help your character evolve over time.

Crysis

Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Crytek**

Crysis will be a revolutionary step forward for first-person shooter games (FPS titles) on both a technical and game-mechanics level when it's released. The storyline is simple: Sent by the Secret Service to investigate strange events in Korea, our hero soon uncovers what is, in fact, an alien invasion. *Crysis* takes advantage of the next-generation graphics in DirectX® 10. Innovative texture processing gives maximum realism to the game's different environments: jungle, aircraft carrier, and more. This gives light effects and reflections on ice an incomparable level of realism and detail.

Flight Simulator X™: Acceleration

Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** Developer: **ACES Studio**

Flight Simulator X: Acceleration is the action-packed expansion for Microsoft's amazingly successful and award-winning *Flight Simulator X*. With newly enhanced DirectX® 10 graphics, gamers of all ages, types, and skill levels can race against friends in amazing, highly detailed locations around the world, test their skills in many new missions, fly three exciting new aircraft, and share rewards, photos, and videos with friends and the broader flight community.

World in Conflict™

Publisher: **Vivendi/Sierra** Developer: **Massive Entertainment**

A strategy game where the Cold War never ended and the Berlin Wall never fell. Winner of the 2007 E3 Game Critics Award for Best Strategy Game, next-generation tactical challenge *World in Conflict* delivers interactive 3D battlefields, riveting multiplayer action, and fast-paced, hard-hitting combat. Pitting NATO forces against Soviets, up to 16 players can enjoy head-to-head and team-based engagements in addition to a solo campaign featuring a gripping storyline created by best-selling author Larry Bond. Stunning visuals and destructible environments set the stage for an armed engagement unlike anything you've seen.

Universe at War: Earth Assault™

Games for Windows LIVE

Publisher: **Sega of America, Inc.** Developer: **Petroglyph**

Near-future Earth is under siege by extraterrestrial forces in this epic sci-fi RTS that grants you the power to save the world—or consume it. Immense alien war machines are yours to customize and command as you dynamically change weapons and technology to adapt to opponents' strategies on the fly. Three unique factions await your orders as you storm across large-scale battlefields, laying waste to all in sight—including familiar landmarks and cities. Manage resources, armies, and territories from a global and tactical perspective or enjoy expansive multiplayer options in competitive online environments, but be careful...humanity's fate rests on your shoulders.

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men™

Games for Windows LIVE

Publisher: **Eidos** Developer: **IO Interactive**

An all-new action-shooter extravaganza from the creators of the multimillion copy–selling *Hitman* franchise, *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* features two mismatched heroes: a flawed mercenary and a dangerous psychopath. Equal parts gripping crime drama and intense adventure, beware everyday environments like crowded nightclubs and unassuming offices that can suddenly erupt into violence. Featured stunts include engaging in combat from moving vehicles, rappelling down buildings, and participating in blistering firefights. Options to play alongside a friend, computer-controlled ally, or against up to eight in heated multiplayer add to its suspenseful appeal.

ADVERTORIAL

Awesome Accessories

The right tools for any gaming need

MICROSOFT® SIDEWINDER™ MOUSE

Microsoft Hardware debuts the revival of its SideWinder line with its first SideWinder gaming mouse, built from the ground up based on worldwide feedback. The Microsoft SideWinder Mouse, a mouse that transcends the category of gaming mice to become a customizable gaming system, was created to meet gamers' individual needs, providing custom tuning options and designed for ultimate performance. The first mouse to wear the coveted SideWinder name, this top-of-the-line gaming system sets itself apart from the competition with never-before-seen features, including the first-ever LCD on a gaming mouse, one-touch access to the Windows Vista™ Games Explorer, 10 buttons with five programmable main buttons that can be set to Quick Turn and other functions, and the first in-game macro record button right on the mouse. This system additionally includes an accessories box to store extra weights and feet that also doubles as a cable anchor. It's a must-have for the PC gamer on your list.

MICROSOFT HABU™

Microsoft Corp. and Razer Inc. have partnered to deliver a high-performance PC gaming experience with the Microsoft Habu. Combining Razer gaming features with a comfortable Microsoft form, this laser gaming mouse delivers performance of 2,000 dots per inch (DPI), selectable side button panels to accommodate different hand sizes and preferences, high-speed motion detection, and an ergonomic design for intense gaming sessions—everything gamers need for advanced gaming performance and control.

MICROSOFT RECLUSA™

For the gamer who desires comfort, performance, and customization from a gaming keyboard, Reclusa should be at the top of the holiday gift list. Microsoft Corp. and Razer Inc. have partnered to deliver a cutting-edge experience—Microsoft Reclusa. Reclusa takes the Razer features that gamers know and love and pairs them with Microsoft reliability and comfort, providing a sleek look with blue LED backlighting; 12 programmable controls including two dials, four side keys, and six hotkeys; and two gold-plated Universal Serial Bus (USB) ports. Gamers can even combine several moves all with the touch of one key.

MICROSOFT INTELLIMOUSE® EXPLORER (IME 3.0)

Back by popular demand, the Microsoft IntelliMouse® Explorer 3.0 has been reintroduced—bringing back legendary tracking, responsiveness, and comfort in a design that gamers know and love. It offers the best image resolution on the market at 9,000 frames per second (FPS), an award-winning ergonomic design, and a wide base and centered port for increased stability and control. The IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0 also delivers exclusive IntelliPoint software features such as the Precision Booster that lets users switch between default speed and precision mode for enhanced control, and the Gaming Toggle, which allows users to quickly select and switch weapons and actions in real time.

XBOX 360® WIRELESS CONTROLLER FOR WINDOWS®

Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 Wireless Controller for Windows®, equipped with smart features for enhanced PC-gaming performance and greater navigational control, allows gamers to experience next-generation gaming with the new standard in wireless controllers. The cross-platform controller delivers a consistent experience for gamers on Windows Vista, Windows XP, and Xbox 360, eliminating the hassle of learning a new controller layout while freeing gamers from wires. The Xbox 360 Controller for Windows also comes with the Xbox 360 Wireless Gaming Receiver for Windows, which allows users to connect the controller and other wireless Xbox® accessories to their PC.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Di Luo

Di spends his days locked in a windowless gray building writing book reports for the American military.

The latest two war games to crowd the field this year are Battlefront.com's *Strategic Command 2: Weapons and Warfare* (an expansion to *SC2: Blitzkrieg*, a flawed but passable game) and Matrix Games' *Commander: Europe at War*. Both are strategic-level games set in Europe and Northern Africa during World War II; both have the usual bits of research, building, and resource management; and both feature combat systems similar to that in *Panzer General*.

Commander brings the better presentation. That's not saying a whole lot, but the game is at least pleasant to look at, and it doesn't sound like fingernails dragged across a blackboard. That's probably the last good thing I'll say about *Commander*, considering that it's little more than a tactical game with a big map for you to move your panzers around.

Comparatively, *Weapons and Warfare* looks and sounds like an amateurish high school project, yet it's a better game in every other aspect—it's far deeper and allows for a wide range of strategic choices, with multiple viable strategies.

Weapons and Warfare also accomplishes the virtually unimaginable: It produces a passable A.I. It doesn't use its naval forces well and often overextends itself, but it's also capable of launching effective offensives and retreating in the face of overwhelming odds. Even at the default difficulty setting, it's no pushover. Conversely, *Commander*'s A.I. only excels at static defenses, with troops cooperatively waiting around for you to pound.

• *Commander*'s version of Barbarossa.

It's a bit much to ask those who don't already have *SC2* to buy both the original and the expansion, but it's worth the investment for those looking for some meat and decent A.I. opposition in their WWII gaming. You can find *Weapons and Warfare* at www.battlefront.com, while those who really must own every war game on the market can find *Commander* at www.matrixgames.com. •

WEAPONS AND WARFARE LOOKS AND SOUNDS LIKE A HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT. BUT IT'S A BETTER GAME.

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

Believe it or not, a time existed when people didn't have computers. Back then, casual gamers turned to daily newspapers for their fix, usually in the form of simple but challenging puzzles. While those games remain newspaper staples, many are now available online...and they're almost all free.

The granddaddy of puzzlers—and probably of all casual games—is the humble crossword. For a classic challenge, you can't do better than the *New York Times* crossword (www.nytimes.com/pages/crosswords). These puzzles are free, but *Times* subscribers (or people willing to pay a modest fee) enjoy access to thousands of past puzzles, including classic Sunday challenges. Players can race against the clock or even team up with a friend online. If that's not enough, head to www.crossword-puzzles.co.uk, which has links to other puzzles from around the world, many of them updated daily.

Another newspaper standby is the Daily Jumble, now online at www.jumble.com, complete with its cartoon and puncentric meta-word. This online version sports two new features: a timer that gives you bonus points for speed-solving, and some truly hideous music. Jumble fans might not like the inability to rescramble the letters online, so if you're that sort of player, make sure you keep a paper and pencil handy.

• The best thing about the online Jumble is that it's not placed right next to *Family Circus* the way it is in your daily paper.

Finally, while I find sudoku fantastically re-creates the thrills of bookkeeping and spreadsheet management, it's hugely popular. The best bet for sudoku fans is www.websudoku.com, where you can play millions of puzzles of every skill level, ensuring that you'll be plugging numbers into grids right up to the moment of your death. •

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TECH TALK

Force-feedback mice. Subwoofers strapped beneath your chair. While the weirdest wastes of plastic are scarce these days, manufacturers continue cranking out new flavors of the same old stuff. Mice, monitors, keyboards—each one promising to make you the coolest kid. Or the best gamer. Or the most rad...shooter...oh, hell. It's all so confusing. With all these options and "improvements" over what we already have, it's hard to filter out the BS.

That said, there comes a point of no return—when your gear gets so old that you find yourself back in the market. Now, as Thanksgiving approaches, this time of year is even more of a mess than usual. You've got to battle people in line at the electronics store—or spend hours online looking for the best products around.

While I refuse to run some kind of glorified consumer-porn buying guide, you need the straight scoop on typical products people look for over the holidays. Stalling until the next-gen GPUs roll out? Good call. Next month, we'll dive deeper into graphics cards—so save your money and hang in there. •Darren Gladstone, Senior Editor

•Happy birthday to us! Gateway? We'll take two, please.

GEEK HOLIDAY

We walk through the aisles at the local electronics store so

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Tap your inner nerd as we school you in the art of beating down antialiasing.

SHOW OFF

Gateway's XHD3000 30-inch display gets a lot right—except the price

PRODUCT: **XHD3000 30-inch monitor** MANUFACTURER: **Gateway Computers** PRICE: **$1,700** URL: **www.gateway.com**

REVIEW

Dell had it good for a long time. With some of the first 30-inch consumer panels on the market, it's remained relatively unchallenged in the monitor market. Still, the company's UltraSharp 3007WFP is far from perfect. As it lacks internal video processing, you need to run everything at the native 2560x1600 resolution for the best results. Gateway's solution, the XHD3000, is a dollar-hungry display that also happens to be an all-in-one upscaling multimedia marvel.

VIDEO PROCESSING?

Gateway's XHD3000 has a 6ms response time and incorporates Silicon Optix's Realta chipset—something normally reserved for reasonably high-end consumer electronics gear. That means it can run, say, a 1680x1050 resolution image and upscale to 2560x1600. It can also upscale content coming from other inputs—and unlike the current 30-inch Dell model, the XHD3000 has a lot of them: DVI, HDMI, component, S-Video, composite, VGA—it's downright criminal to only run your PC into this thing. In our tests, a 480i source cleaned up nicely on the big screen. It can't work miracles, mind you, but it did de-interlace video prior to projection. Want to watch video picture-in-picture and set the background image with a transparency? Easy! There's even a lot of fine-tuning you can do with the onscreen menu system.

COLOR LAB

However, the XHD stumbled in some of our clinical lab tests. First, we found some incompatibility issues with the current Nvidia control panel—though Gateway says beta drivers are en route. In addition, while it can hit reasonable dark (0.43 cd/m²) and spotlight bright (398.7 cd/m²) values, the color uniformity falls behind another 30-inch model, HP's LP3065. The color gamut of the Gateway is a little narrower. Translation: Finely trained eyes might miss more hues.

But hey, you're not a video professional; you just want a flexible monitor that'll make your games look great. That's exactly what this monitor does. It'll just cost you a significant chunk of change for the performance.

Darren Gladstone

VERDICT

- **Good picture quality; able to upscale video to high resolutions.**
- **A little pricey; slightly lackluster color gamut compared to other 30-inchers.**

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

MARKET WATCH

Going out to the stores for the holidays, you're bound to see a couple of other monitors that'll distract you from your mission. How do they compare?	Dell UltraSharp 3007WFP (www.dell.com)	HP LP3065 (www.hp.com)
Size/native resolution	30 inches/2560x1600	30 inches/2560x1600
Inputs	Dual-link DVI-D	Dual-link DVI-D (3)
Response time	12ms	6ms
Luminance	400 cd/m²	300 cd/m²
Contrast ratio	667:1	932:1
Onscreen display/picture management	No/brightness adjust buttons only.	Yes/brightness adjustment and input select.
Worth the money?	$1,500. The granddaddy of big-screen gaming is getting squeezed.	$1,400. High quality plus great image. Good for multiple PCs.
How does it look?	It's a huge display and a crisp performer. The frame looks as good as the picture.	Good color gamut in a big display is nice, but quick response time makes this great.

SHOPPING TIPS

1 Keep your options open. Do you ever plan to plug more than your PC into a display? Then ask about inputs. Many monitors at the very least support both DVI and VGA while others, like the XHD3000, are ready to accept as many as six different devices.

2 Go glare-free? Getting an antiglare, glossy coating on your display sure is tempting. It makes the image look deceptively crisper. It also makes it harder to see. Huh? That's right—if you're working in a brightly lit room, the glossy screens may deflect glare, but they also reflect images.

3 Don't kill your television. Did ya know your HDTV is a monitor? TVs have DVI inputs; so do graphics cards. Check your TV's manual to see if and how you can set it up and its maximum resolution. We've found that plasma HDTVs will give you the best gaming performance with the fewest headaches.

4 Don't disturb the natives. Always run your games at their native resolutions. Granted, adding the XHD3000's video processor bends that rule, but it usually holds true. If you have a low-end computer and aren't as finicky, you can run a game at a lower resolution on an LCD panel. But you'll notice slight problems such as onscreen color smearing.

you don't have to BY DARREN GLADSTONE

That little LCD screen makes a big difference.

IF IT AIN'T BROKE...

Logitech's G15 gaming keyboard got better...and worse

PRODUCT: **G15 Keyboard** MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRICE: **$100** URL: **www.logitech.com**

REVIEW

In 2005, Logitech's macro-heavy G15 keyboard came on the scene. A couple of USB ports, a game toggle that disabled the Start button—these guys thought of everything. Still, its main attraction, a programmable LCD panel, totally went over my head. Why would anyone want to look down at the keyboard while playing a game?

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Fast forward to late 2007 and one late-night *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* fragfest. I looked down for only a moment midfight, and there it was—a full readout of my in-game experience meters. I never installed any special LCD game drivers—it just worked. Same with *WOW*, *LOTRO*... there's even a website (www.g15mods.com) that collects what other people are creating. So I get it now—the LCD panel rocks. So why, Logitech, did you go and shrink this awesome feature—and then raise the price by 20 percent? Surely the new in-line design could've allowed for another inch of space.

Of course, I don't mind that Logitech trimmed back the number of macro keys with the redesign. The 2005 G15 had 18 programmable keys, each with three modes—that's 54 separate macros per game! This year's model pares back to six keys with three settings. By removing those extra keys, the G15 now actually fits in a keyboard tray. Huzzah!

Aside from those nips and tucks—and a graphical face-lift on the software (which still works fairly well)—this is pretty much the same thing as before, just slightly more svelte. Now I just need to find someone to explain why we're paying more for less. **Darren Gladstone**

SHOPPING TIPS

1 **Feel me.** Are you an advanced hunt-and-pecker or a touch typist? Think about buying a keyboard that suits your style. If you plan on giving your keyboard a daily hammering, feel is a priority. To that end, go to the local electronics store and give the boards a few test laps. If they're too pricey, *then* you go bargain hunting online.

2 **Look for extra interface buttons.** It doesn't matter if you're tapping a button to call up e-mail or to play an MP3—shortcut keys are your friend. We're all about maximum efficiency with minimal work. And if that shiny new board has macros, that's even better. Just make sure that the key spacing is right—and that they didn't remove useful keys for the sake of a macro.

3 **What about gaming miniboards?** You know, those pint-sized pads that compress all the often-used game keys into one palm-fitting device? Some people like 'em—but avoid them if you have big hands (or a modicum of self-respect).

4 **Plugged up.** Having extra USB ports on your keyboard is a nice option—especially if you have a wired mouse with a short cord. Just remember that many devices require a powered hub. Another cool perk: Some boards now include audio jacks!

5 **Light bright.** Make sure your glowing keyboard can change colors. Interesting scientific factoid: While blue hues look cooler, orange is easier on the eyes in the dark.

VERDICT

+ Programmable LCD panel; slimmer profile.

– A smaller LCD panel? For more money? Really?

7\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

MARKET WATCH

Going out to the stores for the holidays, you're bound to see a couple of other keyboards that'll distract you from your mission. How do they compare?

	Ideazon Merc Stealth (www.ideazon.com)	Microsoft Reclusa Gaming Keyboard (www.microsoft.com)	WolfKing Timber Wolf Gaming Advantage (www.wolfkingusa.com)
Macro keys	Yes	Yes	No
Separate gaming keypad	Yes	No	Yes
Headphone and mic jacks	Yes	No	No
USB ports	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goofy mood lighting	Yes	Yes	No
Profile manager (or other good software)	Yes—works great.	Yes—works well enough.	What software?
Worth the money?	$90. As far as gaming boards go, this one works very well.	$70. Not worth the asking price.	$40. Inexpensive and very effective—even if it lacks extras.
How does it feel?	A little rubbery in all the right places: the gaming keys.	Solid enough for the job, but keys are a little "clacky" and unresponsive.	It feels fantastic. Great key response in a board this cheap? Buy it!

DON'T FEAR THE REAPER

Ideazon's Reaper Edge Professional Laser Gaming Mouse

This mouse flaunts more snakeskin than David Coverdale.

PRODUCT: **Reaper Edge Professional Laser Gaming Mouse**
MANUFACTURER: **Ideazon** PRICE: **$69.99** URL: **www.ideazon.com**

REVIEW

Make a mouse look intimidating. Give it a grim name like the Reaper Edge Professional Laser Gaming Mouse. But for god's sake, what's up with the snakeskin finish and red LEDs, Knight Rider?

The Reaper's real claim to fame, apparently, is that its laser sensor can be set to as high as 3,200 dpi, which is fairly high...but Razer's new Lachesis has a crazy 4,000 dpi—so there. The real-time dpi switching is set to a single button, as opposed to the two- and three-button configurations on similar gaming mice. It's nice and simple unless you like downshifting dpi settings midgame in a hurry. It's easy to glance down at the gap between your first and middle fingers and instantly know which of the five dpi settings you're using.

The Reaper feels lovely beneath the hand, but the mouse's surface is an insane landscape of competing textures. There's a gray, rubberized grip for your right thumb, along with a rubbery scroll wheel up top. The sides of the mouse are matte black, while the curve of the mouse has a subtle, textured finish, so that there's the slightest traction for the fingers and palm. And while the thumb button layout is nice, Microsoft's SideWinder Mouse is better organized.

The included software pulls its own weight: All five mouse buttons can be programmed with or without macros and myriad calibration tools. Each configuration gets saved as a separate profile.

But where's the heft? For a peripheral this villainous, the Reaper is light to a fault. Even a left-click seems coy, superficial, and flimsy. But it also seems like a *faster* click, which just might suit that trigger finger of yours: The Reaper Edge is certainly quick on the draw. Even so, it's more flitting, twitchier, and less surefooted than its diabolical looks might lead you to believe.

Jenn Frank

VERDICT

- **Comfy; stellar, if a bit simple, software.**
- **Feels extra-plasticky and looks *uhhhhg*-ly.**

6\10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

SHOPPING TIPS

1 **Handle the merchandise.** It's hard to find that perfect fit. Gaming mice are very much a matter of personal preference, after all, and there are many fish in the sea. Some mice contour just right to your hand; some have just the right weight, heft, and glide; and some might have a texture you prefer.

2 **Should you go wireless?** Some gamers prefer wireless mice. But if you go wired, watch out! Some USB wires are shorter than others (I'm looking at you, Reaper Edge), so you'll need to make sure your keyboard has a free USB port.

3 **Think of your thumbs.** Having left and right mouse buttons and a clickable scroll wheel is par for the course—but what about an extra thumb button or two? You might find that it'll change your gaming experience for the better—if you can keep yourself from constantly hitting the button by accident, that is.

4 **Be skeptical of specs.** So the mouse's packaging touts its unbelievable dpi sensor, its speed, its acceleration, and its polling rate—and it apparently has the numbers to back up its claims. Big deal. Once you get above 1,000 dpi, most mice are perfectly serviceable.

5 **Lean to the left.** If you're a left-handed gamer, you already know that the average gaming mouse simply isn't cut out for you. But certain mice—the Microsoft IntelliMouse Explorer and the Razer Lachesis, for instance—are designed to accommodate either hand.

MARKET WATCH

Going out to the stores for the holidays, you're bound to see a couple of other mice that'll distract you from your mission. How do they compare?	Logitech G5 (www.logitech.com)	Razer Lachesis (www.razerzone.com)	Microsoft Sidewinder (www.microsoft.com)
Adjustable weight	Yes	No	Yes
On-mouse dpi shifting	Yes	Yes	Yes
Max dpi setting	2,000	4,000	2,000
Number of buttons	4	9	5
Ambidextrous layout	No	Yes	No
Profile manager software	Pretty bare-bones. Everything you need is on the mouse itself.	Yes. It works well—and there's even on-board mouse memory.	Yes. Includes a software suite so deep you'll want to dive in.
Worth the money?	$60. An oldie, but still a goodie.	$80. Crazy-fast performance in a sleek design.	$80. Great software and a good design. It's a tough call.
How does it feel?	The OG pimp hand. Introduced the ideas of weight and premium feel.	Silky smooth, but far too light for some.	Thumb buttons are a work of art, but MS still needs to work on the case.

• It may seem cool here, but these aren't playing music.

NOISEMAKERS

Five speakers, two ears, one deaf listener

MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRODUCT: **G51 Surround Sound Speaker System** PRICE: **$200** URL: **www.logitech.com**

REVIEW

Every time someone says, "We're making a gamer-friendly speaker kit!" a little piece of me dies. Why? Because gamers don't have that different an ear from anyone else. Here's what they care about, in order: Does it sound good? That's it.

Audiophiles will still be audiophiles whether they play games or not. Don't brand a system as G4m3r-centric to replace the term "cheap." Bring some genuinely good ideas to the table for gamers—*then* make the thing sound good. And if you can keep it under 200 bucks, we wouldn't complain about that, either. Logitech's G51 Surround Sound Speaker System, I'm sorry to say, is not that speaker kit.

COVER YOUR EARS

The bullet points for this 5.1 setup are three sound presets—Normal, Gaming, and Music—so that you don't have to think about overtweaking the audio. How'd that turn out?

Without any special ear-fooling modes on, the G51 sounds muted in the middle—almost as if someone's stomping down everything. Gaming mode kicks on the surrounds and remixes music a little hot, but it still manages to realistically project around the room. As you sprint through hell in *Clive Barker's Jericho*, the ambiance sounds fuller, but everything sounds a little high-pitched. Then there's Music mode, which just flattens the surrounds down to emphasize the front satellites. The squashed results sound like someone's cranking tunes in the basement.

It makes sense that the Gaming mode is the best of the bunch. Sadly, that isn't saying much. You can't futz with the G51's settings at all. Sure, the control knob lets you kill the feed to specific speakers, but you can't adjust the treble. And without a way to adjust the mids and highs, these speakers are just frustrating. In trying to make idiot-proof speakers catering to gamers, Logitech made the G51 sound stupid. • **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **Mic and headphone jack in control pod; simple control interface.**
- **Not the most subtle speakers, in terms of either sound or looks.**

5\10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

SHOPPING TIPS

1 **Check the wattage.** If you plan to rock the house, make sure that your potential speakers can handle the juice. Also make sure to not only check the total wattage of the kit but also how much each individual satellite speaker receives. For example, the G51 reviewed here has 155W, but 56W of that goes to the subwoofer. The rest gets divvied up between the other five speakers. Lacking the oomph, cranking the speakers can devolve into a tinny mess.

2 **Check the bass.** Meaty, beaty bass is easy to muscle out of a subwoofer. But trying to coax a clear and bright high from a satellite speaker isn't. That's when things can start getting expensive for you. If you go to a showroom, try turning down the bass that usually overpowers bad mids and highs. Can the speakers handle complex layered sounds at loud volumes, or will they sound like someone chewing tinfoil?

3 **Take control.** A good, functional control pod can make all the difference in the world. Can it control more than just the volume? Is it an eyesore? Here's something that scored some points for the G51: The control pod has headphone and microphone jacks. More speaker kits need to include that.

4 **Do you really need 5.1?** Do you really need to surround yourself with speakers? You're sitting at a desk. Obviously, you've got room for at least two speakers—but where are the rest gonna go? Just think ahead before you plunk down money on some supersized speaker Stonehenge.

MARKET WATCH

Going out to the stores for the holidays, you're bound to see a couple of other speaker sets that'll distract you from your mission. How do they compare?	Bose Companion 3 Series II (www.bose.com)	Creative Labs Gigaworks S750 (www.creative.com)	Razer Mako 2.1 (www.razerzone.com)
Number of speakers	2.1	7.1	2.1
Adjustable treble and bass	Bass only	Yes	Yes
Headphone jack	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mic input	No	No	No
Control pod	Basic	Advanced	Advanced
Wattage	N/A	700W (70W satellites plus 210W bass)	300W (50W satellites plus 200W subwoofer)
Worth the money?	$250? Eh, pass.	About $400. Better suited for a small living room than in front of your PC.	$300. Seems pricey, but it's very cool.
How hard does it rock?	It blows.	Blows up skirts.	Blows people's minds.

• Great for console players that want to dabble in PC gaming.

CONTROLLING INTEREST

We rumble with Saitek's Cyborg Rumble gamepad

MANUFACTURER: **Saitek** PRODUCT: **Cyborg Rumble** PRICE: **$35** URL: **www.saitek.com**

REVIEW

All right, I might as well just come out and say it: I played two rounds of *Team Fortress 2* using only a gamepad—and didn't suck much more than usual. (That's not saying much.) Saitek has always done a bang-up job creating solid products. But a gamepad that reasonably replaces the keyboard and mouse? Sounds like fantasy—until you try Saitek's Cyborg Rumble.

You knew this was coming. The second Microsoft's Xbox 360 gamepad plugged into a PC, it signaled the next wave of PC-console convergence. Problem is that not every game developer is emphatically jumping on that Games for Windows initiative bandwagon. Hell, new games flaunting the GFW logo like *Stranglehold* don't support gamepads—and *Stranglehold*'s even a console port. Huh?

That's where Saitek steps up. Punch the FPS button on the Cyborg's center, and the right stick becomes your mouse look (you can tweak it to high-precision sensitivity), while the left stick handles WASD movement. (Though just because digital directions are mapped to an analog stick doesn't mean a slight press translates into "walk" as opposed to "run.") The buttons come mapped with standard commands, but you can also create your own preferred configurations with the application driving the controller.

However, the Cyborg baits consolecentric gamers with more than just sophisticated software. The pad feels sturdy and is shaped like the 360 gamepad. The big difference is that the left analog stick and digital D-pad pop out in a separate module. This way, you can let the analog sticks hang low like a PS2 controller if you don't dig the 360 layout. It looks and feels great. And at $35, it's a good deal compared to the 50 bones you'd spend on a 360 controller.

So is this the controller for you? Ask yourself what's more important: a powerful pad that'll encourage console gamers to enter PC-land, or something that'll work for your console and most PC games. • **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

- **Fantastic software; probably the first gamepad to even remotely consider using for an FPS.**
- **Too bad it doesn't work on the 360 as well.**

• **At press time, we discovered that Blue Orb offers a free software suite for the 360 pad that works fairly well. Grab it from www.switchblade.com.**

SHOPPING TIPS

1 Cut the cord? Only you can answer that one for yourself. Some gamepads are wireless, but then you need to start worrying about other stuff—like batteries or making sure they're recharged and ready for combat at all times.

2 Going wired? Give yourself enough rope. Stupidly, some wired gamepads have a short cable connecting them to the PC. Make sure that it's long enough to plug into a front PC port and reach you.

3 Kick the tires. Or, more accurately, mash the buttons when you're at the store. See if they have a demo model that you can lay your hands on. If not, ask a clerk if you can open a box for a quick grab. Nothing's worse than buying a controller you turn out to hate.

4 Get serious with software. Some people don't even want to deal with drivers, let alone proprietary software. As a result, most devices will work without the custom software installed—but it never hurts to install it and at least see what the manufacturer intended its creation to do. You can always uninstall the unwanted software later.

MARKET WATCH

Going out to the stores for the holidays, you're bound to see a couple of other controllers that'll distract you from your mission. How do they compare?	Logitech ChillStream (www.logitech.com)	Microsoft Xbox 360 Controller for Windows (www.microsoft.com)
Number of buttons	8 (plus start and select)	8 (plus start and select)
Number of analog sticks	2	2
Digital D-pad	Yes	Yes
Blows cold air on your hands?	Yes	No
Works on PC and 360?	No	Yes
Button mapping software	No (must use in-game options)	No (must use in-game options)
Worth the money?	$30. Cheap and a little gimmicky; maybe it's for you.	$40. Strong enough for a PC, but built for a console. It works both ways!
How does it feel?	Rubbery and cool	Firm and comfortable

TECH TOOLBOX

GFW and Koroush Ghazi, founder of TweakGuides.com, are teaming up every month to deliver invaluable PC-performance advice. After tackling the big topics here, head to TweakGuides.com for detailed breakdowns on everything from OS optimization to squeezing out extra frames per second in your favorite games.

REQUIRED READING

ATI Catalyst Tweak Guide
www.tweakguides.com/ATICAT_1.html

Nvidia Forceware Tweak Guide
www.tweakguides.com/NVFORCE_1.html

This is a Photoshopped re-creation of antialiasing in action. In this shot, notice the jagged edges everywhere.

Koroush Ghazi

Koroush Ghazi is the founder of TweakGuides.com.

HOW-TO

Jagged graphics may have been all the rage back in the '80s, but modern gamers seek smooth, realistic visuals. This month we look at why jagged edges (or "jaggies") occur in games and various ways to reduce them without completely sacrificing performance.

WHY DO JAGGIES OCCUR?

Images on a computer screen are only a pixelated sample of the original image in your graphics card. At standard gaming resolutions, a lack of sufficient pixel samples often results in an effect called aliasing, which makes everything look like it's made out of Lego blocks. Worse still, these jagged lines shimmer and crawl as you move around the game world, making them even more distracting.

There are two main ways to combat jaggies: The first and simplest is to raise the in-game resolution—for example, by going from 1024x768 to 1600x1200. You'll see a noticeable drop in jaggedness. The second is to use a setting called antialiasing (AA)—the higher the sample rate of AA used, the smoother things will look. You can use one or both of these methods to produce silky smooth graphics.

You can turn on antialiasing and/or increase your resolution to kill jaggies.

The downside is that using either method can wind up noticeably reducing your performance. In addition, some people have monitors that just can't go above certain resolutions. Luckily, there are several ways you can squash the jaggies without killing performance.

NOT ALL AA IS CREATED EQUAL

There are various settings that relate to antialiasing and the reduction of jaggies. It can get a bit confusing, but here are some tips that should help you work out the best methods to improve your picture:

- For starters, always use the latest graphics drivers. Among other things, they often contain new options, bug fixes, and optimizations specifically related to AA.
- When enabling AA, you can set it either using the relevant in-game option (if it exists) or by forcing it through your graphics card's control panel. However, *don't use both at the same time*, because this can cause problems. If given the choice, it's always preferable to only use the in-game AA option, because forcing antialiasing through the graphics card's control panel can cause slowdowns and glitches in some games.
- Some games have options for adjusting the level of detail (LOD) bias, which can make textures much crisper and clearer when it's set

Choose your options wisely.

level of detail (LOD) bias, which can make textures much crisper and clearer when it's set

Choose your options wisely.

TECH TU

Antialiasing the right way

Simply cranking the resolution—or upping your antialiasing—can clean up a messy picture.

to a negative value. But this can also introduce more jaggedness and shimmering. Make sure any LOD bias sliders or LOD-related configuration variables are set to zero or above.

The following tips are broken down for Nvidia and ATI owners respectively. For details on how to access and adjust these settings read the ATI or Nvidia Tweak Guides (see "Tech Toolbox," above).

NVIDIA FORCEWARE CONTROL PANEL

- The Antialiasing > Transparency and Antialiasing > Gamma Correction options adjust AA to further improve the appearance of jaggies, especially on objects that have transparent areas or edges such as chain-link fences and leaves. But this comes at a significant cost in performance, so turning both of them off when using any AA can give a big frames-per-second boost. If you still want to enable Transparency Antialiasing, set it to Multisampling, since Supersampling results in a large performance hit for a rather marginal image-quality gain.
- When selecting an AA mode for GeForce 8 series cards, modes ending with "Q" provide better image quality at the cost of performance. For example, 8xQ looks slightly better but performs slower than regular 8xAA.
- Set the Texture Filtering > Negative LOD Bias option to Clamp if you want to reduce the shimmering that occurs in games that use negative LOD bias to improve textures.

ATI CATALYST CONTROL CENTER

- The Adaptive Antialiasing setting is the same as Nvidia's Transparency Antialiasing option mentioned above, so turn Adaptive AA off for maximum performance. If you must use it, at least set it to Performance mode.
- Lower the Mipmap Detail Level slider in your graphics control panel. This prevents the use of negative LOD bias values that would otherwise increase aliasing and shimmering.

Keep in mind that the older your graphics card and the less video RAM it has, the greater the framerate drop when using AA. On the other hand, if your CPU is even older, increasing the workload on the graphics card by using AA or increasing your resolution merely takes up some available slack, so give it a try.

NO AA? NO PROBLEM

If you can't use AA because a particular game doesn't support it (such as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*), there are ways around this:

- If your monitor allows it, increase your resolution to reduce jaggies and, if necessary, turn down settings like Texture Filtering to compensate for the performance hit, since at higher resolutions textures tend to be clearer anyway.
- On LCD monitors, by running the game at a notch or two below the monitor's native maximum) resolution, you'll get a form of AA that doesn't affect performance due to the slight blurring as your monitor rescales the image to fit its fixed pixel structure.
- If a game has advanced lighting options like HDR (high dynamic range) or bloom—often referred to as postprocessing effects—enabling or raising these can reduce the appearance of jaggies and also provide more atmospheric graphics.

NO PERFECT SOLUTION

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to reducing jaggies, and you'll need to experiment to reach a good compromise.

If all else fails, remember that antialiasing is primarily a graphics card–intensive process, so if getting rid of jaggies is a top priority for you, it's time to upgrade your graphics card. **Koroush Ghazi**

NE-UP

GREENSPEAK

Because we have the extra page

HOT, STEAMY LOVE

Jeff and Gordon, sitting in a tree, K-I-L-L-I-N-G

COLUMN

Jeff Green

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Praising Valve

Software is a little bit like praising the insufferable smarty-pants know-it-all at school. Part of you doesn't want to bother, because you know they already agree with you. Even worse, your acknowledgment means nothing to them. *"Yes, you love us. Of course you do. Now be gone, worm!"*

My relationship with Valve Software over the past 10 years, as both a fan and a magazine editor, has been a rocky one. For every great success that they have had—and they have had many—they have done something equally annoying or arrogant. Those two days I spent in 2004 not playing *Half-Life 2* because Steam wouldn't validate my copy remain two of the most frustrating days I've had since stupid Kathleen Amber put rubber cement in my hair in the third grade. And while I know it's frustrating for you, as gamers, to deal with their endless delays, and secrecy, and aborted game plans, I promise you it's equally frustrating for us to try to write about it all. Half the gray hair on my head? That's Valve's fault.

And yet I love them. I do. I have never been able to fully acknowledge it out loud before, but with the arrival of the awesome, phenomenal *Orange Box*—in which, with typically brilliant nonchalance, Valve simultaneously releases *three* of the best games of the year—they have finally worn me down. I can't find any reason to hold back anymore. So here it is: These guys just freaking rule.

Ten years ago, however, they were still nobodies. When this magazine ran a cover story called "*Quake* Killers" in June 1997, the top game on our list, the one that got the cover image, was the now-infamous game with the robot frogs: *Daikatana*. Also singled out on the cover was *Prey*, which ended up shipping, ridiculously, in 2006. Meanwhile, *Half-Life*, some odd-sounding game from a company we'd never heard of, didn't even rate a mention.

But on November 19, 1998, *Half-Life* was released, and, suddenly, overnight, everything changed. This is not hyperbole. From the moment we first stepped onto the tram and began descending into the Black Mesa Research Facility—with small, white, movielike credits silently accompanying our descent—it was clear we were in for something totally new. Here was a shooter as action movie, presented entirely within the game engine itself. No lame-ass opening cut-scene. No text screen with introductory plot garbage. As we kept playing, we would find no traditional "levels" either, no loading screens with our kill scores tallied. *Half-Life* was the first shooter ever that played out from beginning to end as one continuous, seamless story experienced completely from the player's own eyes. It was the first shooter ever to use "scripted sequences" to dynamically advance the story and set up puzzles and challenges.

Half-Life's importance to PC gaming cannot possibly be overestimated. Not only did it essentially render the traditional shooter obsolete, but it has influenced almost *all* game design to this very day—raising the bar for everyone in terms of how to tell a story in game. (And if that wasn't enough, there's the small matter of a user-made *Half-Life* mod called *Counter-Strike*, which came out in 1999 and has gone on to become the most popular online shooter ever and a mainstay of professional gaming leagues.)

It was a long five years before we heard from Valve again. But when they finally shipped *Half-Life 2* in 2004, accompanied by Steam, a "content-delivery system" that had been in beta for a couple years, they jump-started another

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

revolution. *Half-Life 2* was obviously great (if not quite the miracle the first game was), but it was Steam that was truly the big news here. Ironically, we hated it upon arrival—so much so that we "awarded" it our Coaster of the Year booby prize that year. At the time, it deserved it. Conceived as a method by which Valve could sell, distribute, and update games over the Internet, Steam was also *required* for everyone who bought *Half-Life 2*, even at retail—and the notion that you'd need to be connected online to play a single-player *offline* game was a stretch back in 2004, made way worse by horrendous technical glitches that made it impossible for many users to connect even if they wanted to.

But time has proven Valve right. What once seemed outrageous is all but a nonissue for most gamers, who are all online 24/7 now anyway. And the notion of buying games online is more appealing and viable every day. For me, it's now the purchase method of choice, far preferable to dealing with the sullen, ill-informed nimrods at the retail stores. Even better, the recently launched Steam Community adds a friends list and chat program so you can talk and game with your friends in butt-simple fashion *for free*—utterly, embarrassingly, taking the wind out of the sails of Microsoft's Games for Windows Live initiative, which would charge gamers to do the very same thing. Insert a Nelson *HA-ha* here.

And now, as if all this weren't enough, as if Valve hadn't already inexorably altered the landscape of PC gaming forever, there is *The Orange Box*, a ridiculous embarrassment of riches, with, all at once, strong candidates for the best single-player shooter, multiplayer shooter, and puzzle game of the year. What show-offs! Where most companies can't even get one game right, Valve casually pulls out a stunning trifecta that, again, changes the very nature of how we play and think about games. It's maddening. It's insufferable. It makes me want to hate them. But I don't. I can't. You win, Valve. I love you. You rule.

Now can I please have my Companion Cube back?

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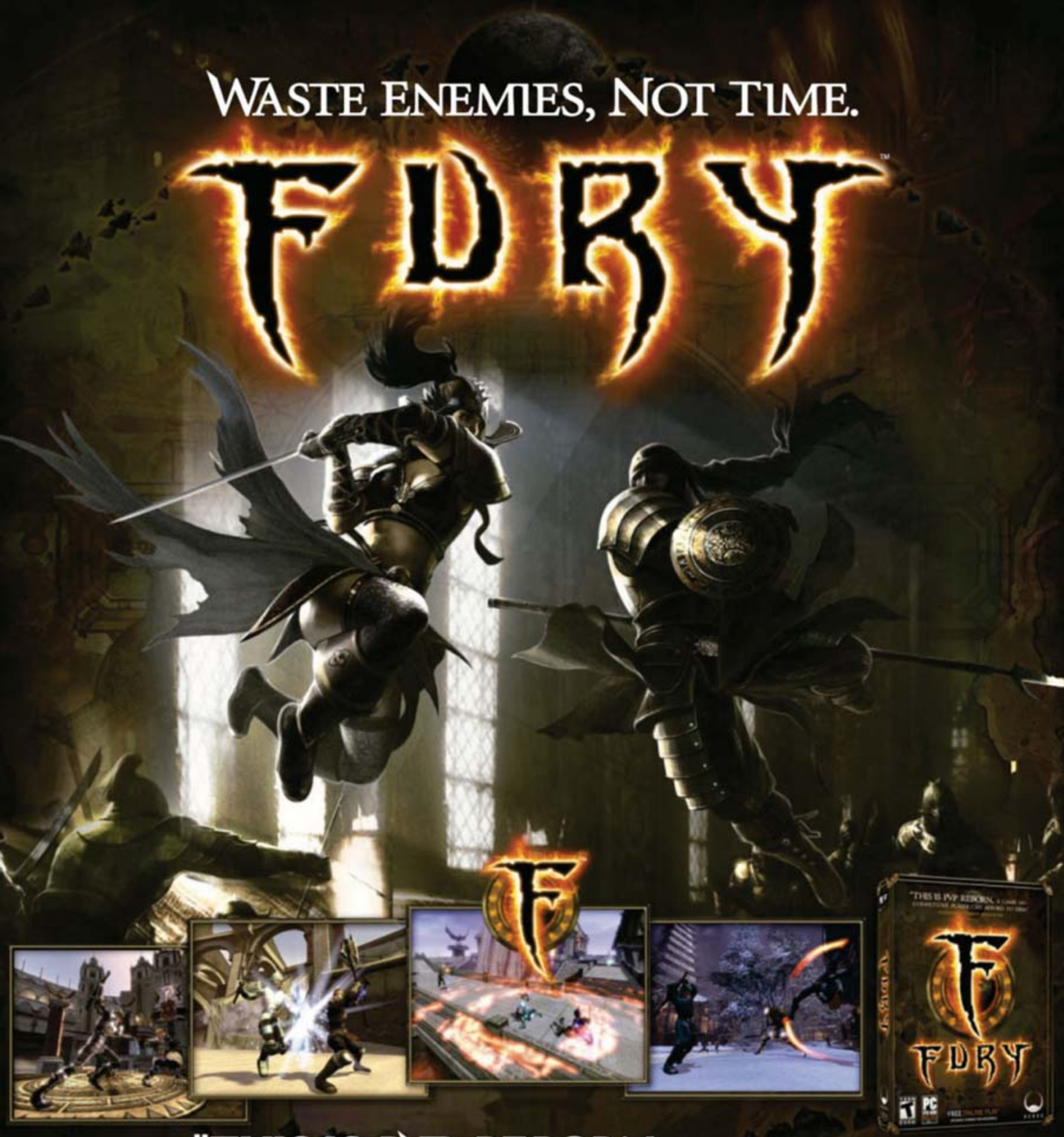

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